

NANTUCKET



Lucius Shepard
Robert Frazier

SLAYRIDES

NANTUCKET SLAYRIDES
signed-limited edition

When the harpooner sunk his point in the flanks of a sperm whale, he and his crew were assured of a wild and scary ride—a Nantucket Sleigh Ride. But this is the late twentieth century, and that barbaric practice is no longer undertaken. No, we seek newer thrills.

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Then you're ready for a Nantucket Slayride.

NANTUCKET SLAYRIDES

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Three Short Novels

LUCIUS SHEPARD
and
ROBERT FRAZIER

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Nantucket, Massachusetts

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Dedicated to Karol
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HOW THE WIND SPOKE AT MADAKET

by Lucius Shepard

I

Softly at dawn, rustling dead leaves on the roof gutters, ticking the wires of the television antenna against the shingled wall, seething through the beach grasses, shifting the bare twigs of a hawthorn to claw at the toolshed door, playfully flipping a peg off the clothesline, snuffling the garbage and tattering the plastic bags, creating a thousand nervous flutters, a thousand more shivery whispers, then building, keening in the window cracks and rattling the panes, smacking down a sheet of plywood that has been leaning against the woodpile, swelling to a pour off the open sea, its howl articulated by the throats of narrow streets and teeth of vacant houses, until you begin to imagine a huge invisible animal throwing back its head and roaring, and the cottage is creaking like the timbers of an old ship...

II

Waking at first light, Peter Ramey lay abed awhile and listened to the wind; then, steeling himself against the cold, he threw off the covers, hurriedly pulled on jeans, tennis shoes, and a flannel shirt, and went into the front room to kindle a fire in the wood stove. Outside, the trees were silhouetted by a backdrop of slate clouds, but the sky wasn't yet bright enough to cast the shadow of the window frame across the picnic-style table beneath it; the other furniture—three chewed-up wicker chairs and a sofa bunk—hunched in their dark corners. The tinder caught, and soon the fire was snapping inside the stove. Still cold, Peter beat his arms against his shoulders and hopped from one foot to another, setting dishes and drawers rattling. He was a pale, heavyset man of thirty-three, with ragged black hair and beard, so tall that he had to duck through the doors of the cottage; and because of his size he had never really settled into the place: he felt like a tramp who had appropriated a child's abandoned tree-house in which to spend the winter.

The kitchen was an alcove off the front room, and after easing the chill, his face stinging with heat, he lit the gas stove and started breakfast. He cut a hole in a slice of bread, laid it in the frying pan, then cracked an egg and poured it into the hole (usually he just opened cans and cereal boxes or heated froze food, but Sara Tappinger, his current lover, had taught him to fix eggs this way, and it made him feel a competent bachelor to keep up the practice). He shoveled down the egg and bread standing at the kitchen window, watching the

gray-shingled houses across the street melt from the darkness, shadowy clumps resolving into thickets of bayberry and sheep laurel, a picket line of Japanese pines beyond them. The wind had dropped and it looked as if the clouds were going to hang around, which was fine by Peter. Since renting the cottage in Madaket eight months before, he had learned that he thrived on bleakness, that the blustery, overcast days nourished his imagination. He had finished one novel here, and he planned to stay until the second was done. And maybe a third. What the hell? There wasn't much point in returning to California. He turned on the water to do dishes, but the thought of LA had soured him on being competent. Screw it! Let the roaches breed. He pulled on a sweater, stuffed a notebook in his pocket, and stepped out into the cold.

As if it had been waiting for him, a blast of wind came swerving around the corner of the cottage and numbed his face. He tucked his chin into his chest and set out walking, turning left on Tennessee Avenue and heading toward Smith Point, past more gray-shingled houses with quarterboards bearing cutesy names above their doors: names like Sea Shanty and Tooth Acres (the vacation home of a New Jersey dentist). When he had arrived on Nantucket he'd been amused by the fact that almost every structure on the Island, even the Sears, Roebuck store, had gray shingles, and he had written his ex-wife a long humorous let's-be-friends letter telling about the shingles, about all the odd characters and quirkiness of the place. His ex-wife hadn't answered, and Peter couldn't blame her, not after what he had done. Solitude was the reason he gave for having moved to Madaket, but while this was superficially true, it would have been more accurate to say that he had been fleeing the ruins of his life. He had been idling along, content with his marriage, churning out scripts for a PBS children's show, when he had fallen obsessively in love with another woman, herself married. Plans and promises had been made, as a result of which he had left his wife; but then, in a sudden reversal of form, the woman—who had never expressed any sentiment other

than boredom and resentment concerning her husband—had decide to honor her vows, leaving Peter alone and feeling both a damned fool and a villain. Desperate, he had fought for her, failed, tried to hate her, failed, and finally, hoping a change of geography would provoke a change of heart—hers or his—he had come to Madaket. That had been in September, directly after the exodus of the summer tourists; it was now May, and though the cold weather still lingered, the tourists were beginning to filter back. But no hearts had changed.

Twenty minutes of brisk walking brought him to the top of a dune overlooking Smith Point, a jut of sand extending a hundred yards or so into the water, with three small islands strung out beyond it; the nearest of these had been separated from the Point during a hurricane, and had the island still been attached, it—in conjunction with Eel Point, some three-quarters of a mile distant—would have given the western end of the land mass the shape of a crab's claw. Far out at sea a ray of sunlight pierced the overcast and dazzled the water beneath to such brilliance that it looked like a laving of fresh white paint. Sea gulls made curving flights overhead, hovered and dropped scallops onto the gravelly shingle to break the shells, then swooped down to pluck the meat. Sad-voweled gusts of wind sprayed a fine grit through the air.

Peter sat in the lee of a dune, choosing a spot from which he could see the ocean between stalks of the pale green beach grass, and opened his notebook. The words HOW THE WIND SPOKE AT MADAKET were printed on the inside cover. He had no illusions that the publishers would keep the title; they would change it to *The Keening* or *The Huffing and Puffing*, package it with a garish cover, and stick it next to *Love's Tormenting Itch* by Wanda LaFontaine on the grocery store racks. But none of that mattered as long as the words were good, and they were, though it hadn't gone well at first, not until he has started walking each morning to Smith Point and writing longhand. Then everything snapped into focus. He had realized it was *his* story he wanted to tell—the woman, his loneliness, his psychic flashes, the resolution of

his character—all wrapped in the eerie metaphor of the wind; the writing had flowed so easily that it seemed the wind was collaborating on the book, whispering in his ear and guiding his hand across the page. He flipped the pages and noticed a paragraph that was a bit too formal, that he should break up and seed throughout the story:

Sadler had spent much of his life in Los Angeles, where the sounds of nature were obscured, and to his mind the constancy of the wind was Nantucket's most remarkable feature. Morning, noon, and the night it flowed across the island, giving him a sense of being a bottom-dweller in an ocean of air, buffeted by currents that sprang from exotic quarters of the globe. He was a lonely soul, and the wind served to articulate his loneliness, to point up the immensity of the world in which he had become isolated; over the months he had come to feel an affinity with it, to consider it a fellow-traveler through emptiness and time. He half believed its vague speechlike utterances to be exactly that—and oracular voice whose powers of speech were not yet fully developed—and from listening to them he derived an impression of impending strangeness. He did not discount the impression, because as far back as he could recall he had received similar ones, and most had been borne out by reality. It was no great prophetic gift, no foreshadowing of earthquakes or assassinations; rather, it was a low-grade psychic ability: flashes of vision often accompanied by queasiness and headaches. Sometimes he could touch an object and know something about its owner, sometimes he would glimpse the shape of an upcoming event. But these premonitions were never clear enough to do him any good, to prevent broken arms or—as he had lately discovered—emotional disaster. Still, he hearkened to them. And now he thought the wind might actually be trying to tell him something of his future, of a new factor about to complicate his existence, for whenever he staked himself out on the dune at Smith Point he would feel...

Gooseflesh pebbling his skin, nausea, an eddying sensation behind his forehead as if his thoughts were spinning out of control. Peter rested his head on his knees and took deep

breaths until the spell had abated. It was happening more and more often, and while it was most likely a product of suggestibility, a side effect of writing such a personal story, he couldn't shake the notion that he had become involved in some Twilight Zone irony, that the story was coming true as he wrote it. He hoped not: it wasn't going to be a very pleasant story. When the last of his nausea had passed, he took out a blue felt-tip, turned to a clean page, and began to detail the unpleasantness.

Two hours and fifteen pages later, hands stiff with cold, he heard a voice hailing him. Sara Tappinger was struggling up the side of the dine from the blacktop, slipping in the soft sand. She was, he thought with a degree of self-satisfaction, a damned pretty woman. Thirtyish; long auburn hair and nice cheekbones; endowed with what one of Peter's islander acquaintances called "big chest problems." That same acquaintance had congratulated him for having scored with Sara, saying that she'd blue-balled half the men on the island after her divorce, and wasn't he the lucky son of a bitch. Peter supposed he *was*: Sara was witty, bright, independent (she ran the local Montessori school), and they were compatible in every way. Yet it was not a towering passion. It was friendly, comfortable, and this Peter found alarming. Although being with her only glossed over his loneliness, he had come to depend on the relationship, and he was concerned that this signaled an overall reduction of his expectations, and that this in turn signaled the onset of middle age, a state for which he was unprepared.

"Hi," she said, flinging herself down beside him and planting a kiss on his cheek. "Wanna play?"

"Why aren't you in school?"

"It's Friday. I told you, remember? Parent-teacher conferences." She took his hand. "You're cold as ice! How long have you been here?"

"Couple of hours."

"You're insane." She laughed, delighted by his insanity. "I was watching you for a bit before I called. With your hair flying about, you looked like a mad Bolshevik hatching a

plot."

"Actually," he said, adopting a Russian accent, "I come here to make contact with our submarines."

"Oh? What's up? An invasion?"

"Not exactly. You see, in Russia we have many shortages. Grain, high technology, blue jeans. But the Russian soul can fly above such hardships. There is, however, a shortage of one commodity that we must solve immediately, and this is why I have lured you here."

She pretended bewilderment. "You need school administrators?"

"No, no. It is more serious. I believe the American word for it is..." He caught her by the shoulders and pushed her down on the sand, pinning her beneath him. "Poontang. We cannot do without."

Her smile faltered, then faded to a look of rapt anticipation. He kissed her. Through her coat, he felt the softness of her breasts. The wind ruffled his hair, and he had the idea that it was leaning over his shoulder, spying on them; he broke off the kiss. He was queasy again. Dizzy.

"You're sweating," she said, dabbing at his brow with a gloved hand. "Is this one of those spells?"

He nodded and lay back against the dune.

"What do you see?" She continued to pat his brow dry, a concerned frown etching delicate lines at the corners of her mouth.

"Nothing," he said.

But he did see something. Something glinting behind a cloudy surface. Something that attracted him yet frightened him at the same time. Something he knew would soon fall to his hand.

Though nobody realized it at the time, the first sign of trouble was the disappearance of Ellen Borchard, age thirteen, on the evening of Tuesday, May 19—an event Peter had written into his book just prior to Sara's visit on Friday morning; but it didn't really begin for him until Friday night while drinking at the Atlantic Cafe in the village of Nantucket. He had gone

there with Sara for dinner, and since the restaurant section was filled to capacity, they had opted for drinks and sandwiches at the bar. They had hardly settled on their stools when Jerry Highsmith—a blond young man who conducted bicycle tours of the island (“...the self-proclaimed Hunk of Hunks,” was Sara’s description of him)—latched onto Peter; he was a regular at the cafe and an aspiring writer, and he took every opportunity to get Peter’s advice. As always, Peter offered encouragement, but he secretly felt that anyone who liked to do their drinking at the Atlantic could have little to say to the reading public: it was a typical New England tourist trap, decorated with brass barometers and old life preservers, and it catered to the young summer crowd, many of whom—evident by their Bahama tans—were packed around the bar. Soon Jerry moved off in pursuit of a redhead with a honeysuckle drawl, a member of his latest tour group, and his stool was taken by Mills Lindstrom, a retired fisherman and a neighbor of Peter’s.

“Damn wind out there’s sharp enough to carve bone,” said Mills by way of a greeting, and ordered a whiskey. He was a big red-faced man stuffed into overalls and a Levi’s jacket; white curls spilled from under his cap, and a lacing of broken blood vessels webbed his cheeks. The lacing was more prominent than usual, because Mills had a load on.

“What are you doing here?” Peter was surprised that Mills would set foot in the cafe; it was his conviction that tourism was a deadly pollution, and places like the Atlantic were its mutant growths.

“Took the boat out today. First time in two months.” Mills knocked back half his whiskey. “Thought I might set a few lines, but then I run into that thing off Smith Point. Didn’t feel like fishin’ anymore.” He emptied his glass and signaled for a refill. “Carl Keating told me it was formin’ out there a while back. Guess it slipped my mind.”

“What thing?” asked Peter.

Mills sipped at his second whiskey. “Offshore pollution aggregate,” he said grimly. “That’s the fancy name, but basically it’s a garbage dump. Must be pretty near a kilometer

square of water covered in garbage. Oil slick, plastic bottles, driftwood. They collect at slack points in the tides, but not usually so close to land. This one ain't more'n fifteen miles off the Point."

Peter was intrigued. "You're talking about something like the Sargasso Sea, right?"

"'Spose so. 'Cept these ain't so big and there ain't no seaweed."

"Are they permanent?"

"This one's new, the one off Smith Point. But there's one about thirty miles off the Vineyard that's been there for some years. Big storm'll break it up, but it'll always come back." Mills patted his pockets, trying unsuccessfully to find his pipe. "Ocean's gettin' like a stagnant pond. Gettin' to where a man throws in a line and more'n likely he'll come up with an ol' boot 'stead of a fish. I 'member twenty years ago when the mackerel was runnin' there'd be so many fish the water would look black for miles. Now you spot a patch of dark water and you know some damn tanker's taken a shit!"

Sara, who had been talking to a friend, put her arm around Peter's shoulder and asked what was up; after Peter had explained, she gave a dramatic shudder and said, "It sounds spooky to me." She affected a sepulchral tone. "Strange magnetic zones that lure sailors to their dooms."

"Spooky!" Mills scoffed. "You got better sense than that, Sara. Spooky!" The more he considered the comment the madder he became. He stood and made a flailing gesture that spilled the drink of a tanned college-age kid behind him; he ignored the kid's complaint and glared at Sara. "Maybe you think this place is spooky. It's the same damn thing! A garbage dump! 'Cept here the garbage walks and talks"—he turned his glare on the kid—"and thinks it owns the god-damn world!"

"Shit," said Peter, watching Mills shoulder his way through the crowd. "I was going to ask him to take me to see it."

"Ask him tomorrow," said Sara. "Though I don't know why you'd want to see it." She grinned and held up her hands to ward off his explanation. "Sorry. I should realize that

anyone who'll spend all day staring at sea gulls would find a square kilometer of garbage downright erotic."

He made a grab for her breasts. "I'll show you erotic!"

She laughed and caught his hand and—her mood suddenly altered—brushed the knuckles against her lips. "Show me later," she said.

They had a few more drinks, talked about Peter's work, about Sara's, and discussed the idea of taking a weekend together in New York. Peter began to acquire a glow. It was partly the drinks, yet he realized that Sara, too, was responsible. Though there had been other women since he had left his wife, he had scarcely noticed them; he had tried to be honest with them, had explained that he was in love with someone else, but he had learned that this was simply a sly form of dishonesty, that when you went to bed with someone—no matter how frank you had been as to your emotional state—they would refuse to believe there was any impediment to commitment that their love could not overcome; and so, in effect, he had used those women. But he did notice Sara, he did appreciate her, and he had not told her about the woman back in LA: once he had thought this a lie, but now he was beginning to suspect it was a sign that the passion was over. He had been in love for such a long time with a woman absent from him that perhaps he had grown to believe absence was a precondition for intensity, and perhaps it was causing him to overlook the birth of a far more realistic yet equally intense passion closer at hand. He studied Sara's face as she rambled on about New York. Beautiful. The kind of beauty that sneaks up on you, that you assumed was mere prettiness. But then, noticing her mouth was a bit too full, you decided that she was interestingly pretty; and then, noticing the energy of the face, how her eyes widened when she talked, how expressive her mouth was, you were led feature by feature to a perception of her beauty. Oh, he noticed her all right. The trouble was that during those months of loneliness (*Months? Christ, it had been over a year!*) he had become distanced from his emotions; he had set up surveillance systems inside his soul, and every time he start-

ed to twitch one way of the other, instead of completing the action he analyzed it and thus aborted it. He doubted he would ever be able to lose himself again.

Sara glanced questioningly at someone behind him. Hugh Weldon, the chief of police. He nodded at them and settled onto the stool. "Sara," he said. "Mr. Ramey. Glad I caught you."

Weldon always struck Peter as the archetypal New Englander. Gaunt; weatherbeaten; dour. His basic expression was so bleak you assumed his gray crewcut to have been an act of penance. He was in his fifties but had a habit of sucking at his teeth that made him seem ten years older. Usually Peter found him amusing; however, on this occasion he experienced nausea and a sense of unease, feelings he recognized as the onset of a premonitory spell.

After exchanging pleasantries with Sara, Weldon turned to Peter. "Don't want you takin' this wrong, Mr. Ramey. But I got to ask where you were last Tuesday evenin' 'round six o'clock."

The feelings were growing stronger, evolving into a sluggish panic that roiled inside Peter like the effects of a bad drug. "Tuesday," he said. "That's when the Borchard girl disappeared."

"My God, Hugh," said Sara testily. "What is this? Roust out the bearded stranger every time somebody's kid runs away? You know damn well that's what Ellen did. I'd run away myself if Ethan Borchard was my father."

"Mabbe." Weldon favored Peter with a neutral stare. "Did you happen to see Ellen last Tuesday, Mr. Ramey?"

"I was home," said Peter, barely able to speak. Sweat was popping out on his forehead, all over his body, and he knew he must look as guilty as hell; but that didn't matter, because he could almost see what was going to happen. He was sitting somewhere, and just out of reach below him something glinted.

"Then you musta seen her," said Weldon. "'Cordin' to witnesses she was mopin' 'round your woodpile for pretty near an hour. Wearin' bright yellow. Be hard to miss that."

"No," said Peter. He was reaching for that glint, and he knew it was going to be bad in any case, very bad, but it would be even worse if he touched it and he couldn't stop himself.

"Now that don't make sense," said Weldon from a long way off. "That cottage of yours is so small, it 'pears to me a man would just naturally catch sight of somethin' like a girl standin' by his woodpile while he was movin' round. Six o'clock's dinnertime for most folks, and you got a nice view of the woodpile out your kitchen window."

"I didn't see her." The spell was starting to fade, and Peter was terribly dizzy.

"Don't see how that's possible." Weldon sucked at his teeth, and the glutinous sound caused Peter's stomach to do a slow flip-flop.

"You ever stop to think, Hugh," said Sara angrily, "that maybe he was otherwise occupied?"

"You know somethin', Sara, why don't you say it plain?"

"I was with him last Tuesday. He was moving around all right, but he wasn't looking out any window. Is that plain enough?"

Weldon sucked at his teeth again. "I 'spect it is. You sure 'bout this?"

Sara gave a sarcastic laugh. "Wanna see my hickey?"

"No reason to be snitty, Sara. I ain't doin' this for pleasure." Weldon heaved to his feet and gazed down at Peter. "You lookin' a bit peaked, Mr. Ramey. Hope it ain't somethin' you ate." He held the stare a moment longer, then pushed off through the crowd.

"God, Peter!" Sara cupped his face in her hands. "You look awful!"

"Dizzy," he said, fumbling for his wallet; he tossed some bills on the counter. "C'mon, I need some air."

With Sara guiding him, he made it through the front door and leaned on the hood of a parked car, head down, gulping in the cold air. Her arm around his shoulders was a good weight that helped steady him, and after a few seconds he began to feel stronger, able to lift his head. The street—with

its cobblestones and newly budded trees and old-fashioned lampposts and tiny shops—looked like a prop for a model railroad. Wind prowled the sidewalks, spinning paper cups and fluttering awnings. A strong gust shivered him and brought a flashback of dizziness and vision. Once more he was reaching down toward that glint, only this time it was very close, so close that its energies were tingling his fingertips, pulling at him, and if he could just stretch out his hand another inch or two...Dizziness overwhelmed him. He caught himself on the hood of the car; his arm gave way, and he slumped forward, feeling the cold metal against his cheek. Sara was calling to someone, asking for help, and he wanted to reassure her, to say he'd be all right in a minute, but the words clogged in his throat and he continued lying there, watching the world tip and spin, until someone with arms stronger than Sara's lifted him and said, "Hey, man! You better stop hittin' the sauce, or I might be tempted to snake your ol' lady."

Streetlight angled a rectangle of yellow glare across the foot of Sara's bed, illuminating her stockinged legs and half of Peter's bulk beneath the covers. She lit a cigarette, then—exasperated at having given into the habit again—she stubbed it out, turned on her side, and lay watching the rise and fall of Peter's chest. Dead to the world. Why, she wondered, was she such a sucker for the damaged ones? She laughed at herself; she knew the answer. She wanted to be the one to make them forget whatever had hurt them, usually another woman. A combination Florence Nightingale and sex therapist, that was her, and she could never resist a new challenge. Though Peter had not talked about it, she could tell some LA ghost owned half his heart. He had all the symptoms. Sudden silences, distracted stares, the way he jumped for the mailbox as soon as the postman came and yet was always disappointed by what he had received. She believed that she owned the other half of his heart, but whenever he started to go with it, to forget the past and immerse himself in the here and now, the ghost would rear up and he'd create a little distance. His

approach to lovemaking, for instance. He'd come on soft and gentle, and then, just as they were on the verge of a new level of intimacy, he'd draw back, crack a joke, or do something rough—like tackling her on the beach that morning— and she would feel cheap and sluttish. Sometimes she thought that the thing to do would be to tell him to get the hell out of her life, to come back and see her when his head was clear. But she knew she wouldn't. He owned more than half of her heart.

She eased off the bed, careful not to wake him, and slipped out of her clothes. A branch scraped the window, startling her, and she held her blouse up to cover her breasts. Oh, right! A Peeping Tom at a third-floor window. In New York, maybe, but not in Nantucket. She tossed the blouse into the laundry hamper and caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror affixed to the closet door. In the dim light the reflection looked elongated and unfamiliar, and she had a feeling that Peter's ghost woman was watching her from across the continent, from another mirror. She could almost make her out. Tall, long-legged, a mournful expression. Sara didn't need to see her to know the woman had been sad: it was the sad ones who were the real heartbreakers, and the men whose hearts they had broken were like fossil records of what the women were. They offered their sadness to be cured, yet it wasn't a cure they wanted, only another reason for sadness, a spicy bit to mix in with the stew they had been stirring all their lives. Sara moved closer to the mirror, and the illusion of the other woman was replaced by the confrontation of her own body. "That's what I'm going to do to you, lady," she whispered. "Blot you out." The words sounded empty.

She turned back the bedspread and slid in beside Peter. He made a muffled noise, and she saw gleams of the streetlights in his eyes. "Sorry about earlier," he said.

"No problem," she said brightly. "I got Bob Frazier and Jerry Highsmith to help bring you home. Do you remember?"

"Vaguely. I'm surprised Jerry could tear himself away from his redhead. Him and his sweet Ginger!" He lifted his arm

so Sara could burrow in against his shoulder. "I guess your reputation's ruined."

"I don't know about that, but it's certainly getting more exotic all the time."

He laughed.

"Peter?" she said.

"Yeah?"

"I'm worried about these spells of yours. That's what this was, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." He was silent for a moment. "I'm worried, too. I've been having them two and three times a day, and that's never happened before. But there's nothing I can do except try not to think about them."

"Can you see what's going to happen?"

"Not really, and there's no point in trying to figure it out. I can't ever use what I see. It just happens, whatever's going to, and then I understand that *that* was what the premonition was about. It's a pretty worthless gift."

"Sara snuggled closer, throwing her leg across his hip. "Why don't we go over to the Cape tomorrow?"

"I was going to check out Mills's garbage dump."

"Okay. We can do that in the morning and still catch the three o'clock boat. It might be good for you to get off the island for a day or so."

"All right. Maybe that's not such a bad idea."

Sara shifted her leg and realized the he was erect. She eased her hand beneath the covers to touch him, and he turned so as to allow her better access. His breath quickened and he kissed her—gentle, treasuring kisses on her lips, her throat, her eyes—and his hips moved in counterpoint to the rhythm of her hand, slowly at first, becoming insistent, convulsive, until he was prodding against her thigh, and she had to take her hand away and let him slip between her legs, opening her. Her thoughts were dissolving into a medium of urgency, her consciousness being reduced to an awareness of heat and shadows. But when he lifted himself above her, that brief separation broke the spell, and she could suddenly hear the fretful sounds of the wind, could see the particulars of his

face and the light fixture on the ceiling behind him. His features seemed to sharpen, to grow alert, and he opened his mouth to speak. She put a finger to his lips. *Please, Peter! No jokes. This is serious.* She beamed the thoughts at him, and maybe they sank in. His face slackened, and as she guided him into place he moaned, a despairing sound such as a ghost might make at the end of its earthly term; and then she was clawing at him, driving him deeper inside, and talking to him, not words, just breathy noises, sighs and whispers, but having meanings that he would understand.

III

That same night while Peter and Sara were asleep, Sally McColl was driving her jeep along the blacktop that led to Smith Point. She was drunk and not giving a good goddamn where she wandered, steering in a never-ending S, sending the headlights veering across low gorse hills and gnarled hawthorns. With one hand she kept a choke hold on a pint of cherry brandy, her third of the evening. 'Sconset Sally, they called her. Crazy Sally. Seventy-four years old and still able to shell scallops and row better than most men on the island. Wrapped in a couple of Salvation Army dresses, two moth-eaten sweaters, a tweed jacket gone at the elbows, and generally looking like a bag lady from hell. Brambles of white hair sticking out from under a battered fisherman's hat. Static fizzled on the radio, and Sally accompanied it with mutters, curses, and fitful bursts of song, all things that echoed the jumble of her thoughts. She parked near the spot where the blacktop gave out, staggered from the jeep and stumped through the soft sand to the top of the dune. There she swayed for a moment, dizzy by the pour of wind and the sweep of darkness broken only by a few stars on the horizon. "Whoo-oo!" she screeched; the wind sucked up her yell and added it to its sound. She lurched forward, slipped, and went rolling down the face of the dune. Sand adhering to her tongue, spitting, she sat up and found that somehow she'd managed to hold on to the bottle, that the cap was still on even though she hadn't screwed it tight. A flicker of paranoia set her to jerking her head from side to side. She didn't want

anybody spying on her, spreading more stories about old drunk Sally. The ones they told were bad enough. Half were lies, and the rest were slanted to make her seem loopy...like the one about how she'd bought herself a mail-order husband and he'd run off after two weeks, stowed away on a boat, scared to death of her, and she had come riding on horseback through Nantucket, hoping to bring him home. A swarthy little bump of a man, Eyetalian, no English, and he hadn't known shit from shortcake in bed. Better to do yourself than fool with a pimple like him. All she'd wanted had been the goddamn trousers she'd dressed him in, and the tale-tellers had cast her as a desperate woman. Bastards! Buncha goddamn...

Sally's train of thought pulled into a tunnel, and she sat staring blankly at the dark. Damn cold, it was, and windy a bit as well. She took a swig of brandy; when it hit bottom she felt ten degrees warmer. Another swig put her legs under her, and she started walking along the beach away from the Point, searching for a nice lonesome spot where nobody was likely to happen by. That was what she wanted. Just to sit and spit and feel the night on her skin. You couldn't hardly find such a place nowadays, what with all the summer trash floating in from the mainland, the Gucci-Pucci sissies and the little swish-tailed chick-women eager to bend over and butter their behinds for the first five-hundred-dollar suit that showed interest, probably some fat-boy junior executive who couldn't get it up and would marry 'em just for the privilege of being humiliated every night...That train of thought went spiraling off, and Sally spiraled after it. She sat down with a thump. She gave out with a cackle, liked the sound of it, and cackled louder. She sipped at the brandy, wishing that she had brought another bottle, letting her thoughts subside into a crackle of half-formed images and memories that seemed to have been urged upon her by the thrashings and skitterings of the wind. As her eyes adjusted, she made out a couple of houses lumped against the lesser blackness of the sky. Vacant summer places. No, wait! Those were them whatchamacallems. Condominiums. What had that Ramey

boy said about 'em. Iniums with a condom slipped over each. Prophylactic lives. He was a good boy, that Peter. The first person she'd met with the gift for dog's years, and it was strong in him, stronger than her gift, which wasn't good for much except guessing the weather, and she was so old now that her bones could do that just as well. He'd told her how some people in California had blown up condominiums to protect the beauty of their coastline, and it had struck her as a fine idea. The thought of condominiums ringing the island caused her to tear up, and with a burst of drunken nostalgia she remembered what a wonder the sea had been when she was a girl. Clean, pure, rife with spirits. She'd been able to sense those spirits...

Battering and crunching from somewhere off in the dunes. She staggered to her feet, cocking an ear. More sounds of breakage. She headed toward them, toward the condominiums. Might be some kids vandalizing the place. If so, she'd cheer 'em on. But as she climbed to the top of the nearest dune, the sounds died away. Then the wind picked up, not howling or roaring, but with a weird ululation, almost a melody, as if it were pouring through the holes of an enormous flute.

The back of Sally's neck prickled, and a cold slimy worm of fear wriggled the length of her spine. She was close enough to the condominiums to see their rooflines against the sky, but she could see nothing else. There was only the eerie music of the wind, repeating the same passage of five notes over and over. Then it, too, died. Sally took a slug of brandy, screwed up her courage, and started walking again; the beach grass swayed and tickled her hands, and the tickling spread gooseflesh up her arms. About twenty feet from the first condominium she stopped, her heartbeat ragged. Fear was turning the brandy to a sour mess in her stomach. What was there to be afraid of, she asked herself. The wind? Shit! She had another slug of brandy and went forward. It was so dark she had to grope her way along the wall, and she was startled to find a hole smack in the middle of it. Bigger than a damn door, it was. Edged by broken boards and ripped

shingles. Like a giant fist had smashed it through. Her mouth was cottony, but she stepped inside. She rummaged in her pockets, dug out a box of kitchen matches, lit one and cupped it with her hands until it burned steadily. The room was unfurnished, just carpeting and telephone fixtures and paint-spattered newspapers and rags. Sliding glass doors were inset into the opposite wall, but most of the glass had been blown out, crunching under her feet; as she drew near, an icicle-shaped piece hanging from the frame caught the glow of the match and for a second was etched on the dark like a fiery tooth. The match scorched her fingers. She dropped it and lit another and moved into the next room. More holes and a heaviness in the air, as if the house were holding its breath. Nerves, she thought. Goddamn old-woman nerves. Maybe it *had* been kids, drunk and ramming a car into the walls. A breeze eeled from somewhere and puffed out the match. She lit a third one. The breeze extinguished it, too, and she realized that kids hadn't been responsible for the damage, because the breeze didn't blow away this time: it fluttered around her, lifting her dress, her hair, twining about her legs, patting and frisking her all over, and in the breeze was a feeling, a knowledge, that turned her bones to splinters of black ice. Something had come from the sea, some evil thing with the wind for a body had smashed holes in the walls to play its foul, bone-chilling music, and it was surrounding her, toying with her, getting ready to whirl her off to hell and gone. It had a clammy, bitter smell, and that smell clung to her skin everywhere it touched.

Sally backed into the first room, wanting to scream but only able to manage a feeble squawk. The wind flowed after her, lifting the newspapers and flapping them at her like crinkly white bats, matting them against her face and chest. Then she screamed. She dove for the hole in the wall and flung herself into a frenzied heart-busting run, stumbling, falling, scrambling to her feet, and waving her arms and yelling. Behind her, the wind gushed from the house, roaring, and she imagined it shaping itself into a towering figure, a black demon who was laughing at her, letting her think she might make it

before swooping down and tearing her apart. She rolled down the face of the last dune, and her breath sobbing, clawed at the door handle of the jeep; she jiggled the key in the ignition, prayed until the engine turned over, and then, gears grinding, swerved off along the Nantucket road.

She was halfway to 'Sconset before she grew calm enough to think what to do, and the first thing she decided was to drive straight to Nantucket and tell Hugh Weldon. Though god only knew what *he'd* do. Or what he'd say. That scrawny flint of a man! Like as not he'd laugh in her face and be off to share the latest 'Sconset Sally story with his cronies. No, she told herself. There weren't going to be any more stories about ol' Sally drunk as the moon and seeing ghosts and raving about the wind. They wouldn't believe her, so let 'em think kids had done it. A little sun of gleeful viciousness rose in her thoughts, burning away the shadows of her fear and heating her blood even quicker than would a jolt of cherry brandy. Let it happen, whatever was going to happen, and *then* she'd tell her story, *then* she'd say I would have told you sooner, but you would have called me crazy. Oh, no! She wouldn't be the butt of their jokes this time. Let 'em find out for themselves that some new devil had come from the sea.

IV

Mills Lindstrom's boat was a Boston whaler, about twenty feet of blue squarish hull with a couple of bucket seats, a control pylon, and a fifty-five-horsepower outboard racketing behind. Sara had to sit on Peter's lap, and while he wouldn't have minded that in any case, in this case he appreciated the extra warmth. Though it was calm, the sea rolling in long swells, heavy clouds and a cold front had settled over the island; farther out the sun was breaking through, but all around them crumbling banks of whitish mist hung close to the water. The gloom couldn't dampen Peter's mood, however; he was anticipating a pleasant weekend with Sara and gave hardly a thought to their destination, carrying on a steady stream of chatter. Mills, on the other hand, was brooding and taciturn, and when they came in sight of the offshore pollution aggregate, a dirty brown stain spreading for hundreds of yards across the water, he pulled his pipe from beneath his rain gear and set to chomping the stem, as if to restrain impassioned speech.

Peter borrowed Mills's binoculars and peered ahead. The surface of the aggregate was pocked by thousands of white objects; at this distance they looked like bones sticking up from the thin soil. Streamers of mist were woven across it, and the edge was shifting sluggishly, an obscene cap sliding over the dome of a swell. It was a no-man's-land, an ugly blot, and as they drew nearer, its ugliness increased. The most common of the white objects were Clorox bottles such as fishermen used to mark the spread of their nets; there were

also a great many fluorescent tubes, other plastic debris, torn pieces of netting, and driftwood, all mired in a pale brown jelly of decayed oil products. It was a Golgotha of the inorganic world, a plain of ultimate spiritual malaise, of entropy triumphant, and perhaps, thought Peter, the entire earth would one day come to resemble it. The briny, bitter stench made his skin crawl.

"God," said Sara as they began cruising along the edge; she opened her mouth to say more but couldn't find the words.

"I see why you felt like drinking last night," said Peter to Mills, who just shook his head and grunted.

"Can we go into it," asked Sara.

"All them torn nets'll foul the propeller." Mills stared at her askance. "Ain't it bad enough from out here?"

"We can tip up the motor and row in," Peter suggested. "Come on, Mills. It'll be like landing on the moon."

And, indeed, as they rowed into the aggregate, cutting through the pale brown stuff, Peter felt that they had crossed some intangible border into uncharted territory. The air seemed heavier, full of suppressed energy, and the silence seemed deeper; the only sound was the slosh of the oars. Mills had told Peter that the thing would have roughly a spiral shape, due to the actions of opposing currents, and that intensified his feeling of having entered the unknown; he pictured them as characters in a fantasy novel, creeping across a great device inlaid on the floor of an abandoned temple. Debris bobbed against the hull. The brown glop had the consistency of Jell-O that hadn't set properly, and when Peter dipped his hand into it, beads accumulated on his fingers. Some of the textures on the surface had a horrid, almost organic, beauty; bleached, wormlike tendrils of netting mired in the slick, reminding Peter of some animal's diseased spoor; larval chips of wood matted on a bed of glistening cellophane; a blue plastic lid bearing a girl's sun-bonneted face embedded in a spaghetti of Styrofoam strips. They would point out such oddities to each other, but nobody was eager to talk. The desolation of the aggregate was oppressive, and not even a ray of sunlight fingering the boat, as

if a searchlight was keeping track of them from the real world, not even that could dispel the gloom. Then, about two hundred yards in, Peter saw something shiny inside an opaque plastic container, reached down and picked it up.

The instant he brought it on board he realized that this was the object about which he had experienced the premonition, and he had the urge to throw it back; but he felt such a powerful attraction to it that instead he removed the lid and lifted out a pair of silver combs, the sort Spanish women wear in their hair. Touching them, he had a vivid mental image of a young woman's face: a pale, drawn face that might have been beautiful but was starved-thin and worn by sorrows. Gabriela. The name seeped into his consciousness the way a paw track frozen in the ground melts up from beneath the snow during a thaw. Gabriela Pa...Pasco...Pascual. His finger traced the design etched on the combs, and every curlicue conveyed a sense of her personality. Sadness, loneliness, and—most of all—terror. She'd been afraid for a very long time. Sara asked to see the combs, took them, and his ghostly impression of Gabriela Pascual's life flew apart like a creature of foam, leaving him disoriented.

"They're beautiful," said Sara. "And they must be really old."

"Looks like Mexican work," said Mills. "Hmph. What we got here?" He stretched out his oar, trying to snag something; he hauled the oar back in and Sara lifted the thing from the blade: a rag showing yellow streaks through its coating of slick.

"It's a blouse." Sara turned it in her hands, her nose wrinkling at having to touch the slick; she stopped turning it and stared at Peter. "Oh, God! It's Ellen Borchard's."

Peter took it from her. Beneath the manufacturer's label was Ellen Borchard's name tag. He closed his eyes, hoping to read some impression as he had with the silver combs. Nothing. His gift had deserted him. But he had a bad feeling that he knew exactly what had happened to the girl.

"Better take that to Hugh Weldon," said Mills. "Might..." He broke off and stared out over the aggregate.

At first Peter didn't see what had caught Mills's eyes; then he noticed that a wind had sprung up. A most peculiar wind. It was moving slowly around the boat about fifty feet away, its path evident by the agitation of the debris over which it passed; it whispered and sighed, and with a sucking noise a couple of Clorox bottles popped out of the slick and spun into the air. Each time the wind made a complete circuit of the boat, it seemed to have grown a little stronger.

"What the hell!" Mills's face was drained of color, the web of broken blood vessels on his cheeks showing like a bright red tattoo.

Sara's nails bit into Peter's arm, and he was overwhelmed by the knowledge that this wind was what he had been warned against. Panicked, he shook Sara off, scramble to the back of the boat, and tipped down the outboard motor.

"The nets..." Mills began.

"Fuck the nets! Let's get out of here!"

The wind was keening, and the entire surface of the aggregate was starting to heave. Crouched in the stern, Peter was again struck by its resemblance to a graveyard with bones sticking out of the earth, only now all the bones were wiggling, working themselves loose. Some of the Clorox bottles were rolling sluggishly along, bouncing high when they hit an obstruction. The sight froze him for a moment, but as Mills fired the engine, he crawled back to his seat and pulled Sara down with him. Mills turned the boat toward Madaket. The slick glubbed and smacked against the hull, and brown flecks splashed onto the windshield and oozed sideways. With each passing second the wind grew stronger and louder, building to a howl that drowned out the motor. A fluorescent tube went twirling up beside them like a cheerleader's baton; bottles and cellophane and splatters of oil slick flew at them from every direction. Sara ducked her face into Peter's shoulder, and he held her tight, praying that the propeller wouldn't foul. Mills swerved to avoid a piece of driftwood that sailed past the bow, and then they were into clear water, out of the wind—though they could still hear it raging—and running down the long slope of a swell.

Relieved, Peter stroked Sara's hair and let out a shuddering breath; but when he glanced behind them all his relief went glimmering. Thousands upon thousands of Clorox bottles and fluorescent tubes and other debris were spinning in midair above the aggregate—an insane mobile posed against the gray sky—and just beyond the edge narrow tracks of water were being lashed up, as if a windy knife were slicing back and forth across it, undecided whether or not to follow them home.

Hugh Weldon had been out in Madaket investigating the vandalism of the condominiums, and after receiving the radio call it had only taken him a few minutes to get to Peter's cottage. He sat beside Mills at the picnic table, listening to their story, and from the perspective of the sofa bunk, where Peter was sitting, his arms around Sara, the chief presented an angular mantislike silhouette against the gray light from the window; the squabbling of the police radio outside seemed part of his persona, a radiation emanating from him. When they had finished he stood, walked to the wood stove, lifted the lid, and spat inside it; the stove crackled and spat back a spark.

"If it was just you two," he said to Peter and Sara, "I'd run you in and find out what you been smokin'. But Mills here don't have the imagination for this kind of foolishness, so I guess I got to believe you." He set down the lid with a clank and squinted at Peter. "You said you wrote somethin' 'bout Ellen Borchard in your book. What?"

Peter leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "She was down at Smith Point just after dark. She was angry at her parents, and she wanted to scare them. So she took off her blouse—she had extra clothes with her, because she was planning to run away—and was about to rip it up, to make them think she'd been murdered, when the wind killed her."

"Now how'd it do that?" asked Weldon.

"In the book the wind was a sort of elemental. Cruel, capricious. It played with her. Knocked her down, rolled her along the shingle. Then it would let her up and knock her

down again. She was bleeding all over from the shell-cuts, and screaming. Finally it whirled her up and out to sea." Peter stared down at his hands; the inside of his head felt heavy, solid, as if his brains were made of mercury.

"Jesus Christ!" said Weldon. "What do you say 'bout that, Mills?"

"It wasn't no normal wind," said Mills. "That's all I know."

"Jesus Christ!" repeated Weldon; he rubbed the back of his neck and peered at Peter. "I been twenty years at this job, and I've heard some tall tales. But this...what did you say it was? An elemental?"

"Yeah, but I don't really know for sure. Maybe if I could handle those combs again, I could learn more about it."

"Peter." Sara put her hand on his arm; her brow furrowed. "Why don't we let Hugh deal with it?"

Weldon was amused. "Naw, Sara. You let Mr. Ramey see what he can do." He chuckled. "Maybe he can tell me how the Red Sox are gonna do this year. Me and Mills can have another look at that mess off the Point."

Mills's neck seemed to retract into his shoulders. "I ain't goin' back out there, Hugh. And if you want my opinion, you better keep clear of it yourself."

"Damn it, Mills." Weldon smacked his hand against his hip. "I ain't gonna beg, but you sure as hell could save me some trouble. It'll take me an hour to get the Coast Guard boys off their duffs. Wait a minute!" He turned to Peter. "Maybe you people were seein' things. There musta been all kinds of bad chemicals fumin' up from that mess. Could be you breathed somethin' in." Brakes squealed, a car door slammed, and seconds later the bedraggled figure of Sally McColl strode past the window and knocked on the door.

"What in god's name does she want?" said Weldon.

Peter opened the door, and Sally gave him a gap-toothed grin. "Mornin', Peter," she said. She was wearing a stained raincoat over her usual assortment of dresses and sweaters, and a gaily colored man's necktie for a scarf. "Is that skinny ol' fart Hugh Weldon inside?"

"I ain't got time for your crap today, Sally," called Weldon.

Sally pushed past Peter. "Mornin', Sara. Mills."

"Hear one of your dogs just had a litter," said Mills.

"Yep. Six snarly little bastards." Sally wiped her nose with the back of her hand and checked it to see what had rubbed off. "You in the market?"

"I might drop 'round and take a look," said Mills. "Dobermans or Shepherds?"

"Dobermans. Gonna be fierce."

"What's on your mind, Sally?" said Weldon, stepping between them.

"Got a confession to make."

Weldon chuckled. "What'd you do now? You sure as hell didn't burglarize no dress shop."

A frown etched the wrinkles deeper on Sally's face. "You stupid son of a bitch," she said flatly. "I swear, God musta been runnin' short of everything but horseshit when He made you."

"Listen, you ol'..."

"Musta ground up your balls and used 'em for brains," Sally went on. "Musta..."

"Sally!" Peter pushed them apart and took the old woman by the shoulders. A glaze faded from her eyes as she looked at him. At last she shrugged free of his grasp and patted down her hair; a peculiarly feminine gesture for someone so shapeless and careworn.

"I shoulda told you sooner," she said to Weldon. "but I was sick of you laughin' at me. Then I decided it might be important and I'd have to risk listenin' to your jackass bray. So I'm tellin' you." She looked out the window. "I know what done them condominiums. It was the wind." She snapped a hateful glance at Weldon. "And I ain't crazy, neither!"

Peter felt weak in the knees. They were surrounded by trouble; it was in the air as it had been off Smith Point, yet stronger, as if he were becoming sensitized to the feeling.

"The wind," Weldon said, acting dazed.

"That's right," said Sally defiantly. "It punched holes in them damn buildin's and was whistlin' through 'em like it was playin' music." She glared at him. "Don't you believe

me?"

"He believes you," said Peter. "We think the wind killed Ellen Borchard."

"Now don't be spreadin' that around! We ain't sure!" Weldon said it desperately, clinging to disbelief.

Sally crossed the room to Peter. "It's true 'bout the Borchard girl, ain't it?"

"I think so," he said.

"And that thing what killed her, it's here in Madaket. You feel it don'tcha?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

Sally headed for the door.

"Where you goin'?" asked Weldon. She mumbled and went outside; Peter saw her pacing back and forth in the yard. "Crazy 'ol bat," said Weldon.

"Mabbe she is," said Mills. "But you ought not to be treatin' her so harsh after all she's done."

"What's she done?" asked Peter.

"Sally used to live up in Madaket," said Mills. "And whenever a ship would run up on Dry Shoals or one of the others, she'd make for the wreck in that ol' lobster boat of hers. Most times she'd beat the Coast Guard to 'em. Musta saved fifty or sixty souls over the years, sailin' out in the worst kind of weather."

"Mills!" Weldon said emphatically. "run me out to that garbage dump of yours."

Mills stood and hitched up his pants. 'Ain't you been listenin', Hugh? Peter and Sally say that thing's round her somewhere."

Weldon was a frustrated man. He sucked at his teeth, and his face worked. He picked up the container holding the combs, glanced at Peter, then set the container down.

"You want me to see what I can learn from those?" asked Peter.

Weldon shrugged. "Can't hurt nothin', I guess." He stared out the window as if unconcerned with the issue.

Peter took the container and sat down next to Sara. "Wait," she said. "I don't understand. If this thing is nearby,

shouldn't we get away from here?" Nobody answered.

The plastic container was cold, and when Peter pried off the lid, the cold welled out at him. Intense, aching cold, as if he had opened the door to a meat locker.

Sally burst into the room and pointed at the container. "What's that?"

"Some old combs," said Peter. "They didn't feel like this when I found them. Not as strong."

"Feel like what?" asked Weldon; every new mystery seemed to be unnerving him further, and Peter suspected that if the mysteries weren't cleared up soon, the chief would start disbelieving them on purely practical grounds.

Sally came over to Peter and looked into the container. "Gimme one," she said, extending a grimy hand. Weldon and Mills moved up behind her, like two old soldiers flanking their mad queen.

Reluctantly, Peter picked up one of the combs. Its coldness flowed into his arm, his head, and for a moment he was in the midst of a storm-tossed sea, terrified, waves crashing over the bows of a fishing boat and the wind singing around him. He dropped the comb. His hands were trembling, and his heart was doing a jig against his chest wall.

"Oh, shit," he said to no one in particular. "I don't know if I want to do this."

Sara gave Sally her seat beside Peter, and as they handled the combs, setting them down every minute or so to report what they had learned, she chewed her nails and fretted. She could relate to Hugh Weldon's frustration; it was awful just to sit and watch. Each time Peter and Sally handled the combs their respiration grew shallow and their eyes rolled back, and when they laid them aside they appeared drained and frightened.

"Gabriela Pascual was from Miami," said Peter. "I can't tell exactly when all this happened, but it was years ago...because in my image of her, her clothes look a little old-fashioned. Maybe ten or fifteen years back. Something like that. Anyway, there was trouble for her onshore, some

emotional entanglement, and her brother didn't want to leave her alone, so he took her along on a fishing voyage. He was a commercial fisherman."

"She had the gift," Sally chimed in. "that's why there's so much of her in the combs. That, and because she killed herself and died holdin' 'em."

"Why'd she kill herself?" asked Weldon.

"Fear," said Peter. "Loneliness. Crazy as it sounds, the wind was holding her prisoner. I think she cracked up from being alone on a drifting boat with only this thing—the elemental—for company."

"Alone?" said Weldon. "What happened to her brother?"

"He died." Sally's voice was shaky. "The wind came down and killed 'em all 'cept this Gabriela. It wanted her."

As the story unfolded, gusts of wind began to shudder the cottage and Sara tried to remain unconcerned as to whether or not they were natural phenomena. She turned her eyes from the window, away from the heaving trees and bushes, and concentrated on what was being said; but that in itself was so eerie that she couldn't keep from jumping whenever the panes rattled. Gabriela Pascual, said Peter, had been frequently seasick during the cruise; she had been frightened of the crew, most of whom considered her bad luck, and possessed by a feeling of imminent disaster. And, Sally added, that premonition had been borne out. One cloudless calm day the elemental had swept down and killed everyone. Everyone except Gabriela. It had whirled the crew and her brother into the air, smashed them against the bulkheads, dropped them onto the decks. She had expected to die as well, but it had seemed interested in her. It had caressed her and played with her, knocking her down and rolling her about; and at night it had poured through the passageways and broken windows, making a chilling music that—as the days passed and the ship drifted north—she came to half-understand.

"She didn't think of it as a spirit," said Peter. "There wasn't anything mystical about it to her mind. It struck her as being kind of a..."

"An animal," interrupted Sally. "A big, stupid animal. Vicious, it was. But not evil. Least it didn't feel evil to her."

Gabriela, Peter went on, had never been sure what it wanted of her—perhaps her presence had been all. Most of the time it had left her alone. Then, suddenly, it would spring up out of a calm to juggle splinters of glass or chase her about. Once the ship had drifted near to shore, and when she had attempted to jump over the side, the elemental had battered her and driven her below-decks. Though at first it had controlled the drift of the ship, gradually it lost interest in her and on several occasions the ship almost foundered. Finally, no longer caring to prolong the inevitable, she had cut her wrists and died clutching the container holding her most valued possessions, her grandmother's silver combs, with the wind howling in her ears.

Peter leaned back against the wall, his eyes shut, and Sally sighed and patted her breast. For a long moment no one spoke.

"Wonder why it's hangin' round that garbage out there," said Mills.

"Maybe no reason," said Peter dully. "Or maybe it's attracted to slack points in the tides, to some condition of the air."

"I don't get it," said Weldon. "what the hell is it? It can't be no animal."

"Why not?" Peter stood, swayed, then righted himself. "What's wind, anyway? Charged ions, vacating air masses. Who's to say that some stable form of ions couldn't approximate a life? Could be there's one of these at the heart of every storm, and they've always been mistaken for spirits, given an anthropomorphic character. Like Ariel." He laughed disconsolately. "It's no sprite, that's for sure."

Sally's eyes looked unnaturally bright, like watery jewels lodged in her weathered face. "The sea breeds 'em," she said firmly, as if that were explanation enough of anything strange.

"Peter's book was right," said Sara. "It's an elemental. That's what you're describing, anyway. A violent, inhuman creature, part spirit and part animal." She laughed, and the

laugh edged a bit high, bordering on the hysteric. "It's hard to believe."

"Right!" said Weldon. "Damned hard! I got an ol' crazy woman and a man I don't know from Adam tellin' me..."

"Listen!" said Mills; he walked to the door and swung it open.

It took Sara a second to fix on the sound, but then she realized that the wind had died, had gone from heavy gusts to trifling breezes in an instant, and farther way, coming from the sea, or nearer, maybe as close as Tennessee Avenue, she heard a roaring.

V

A few moments earlier Jerry Highsmith had been both earning his living and looking forward to a night of exotic pleasures in the arms of Ginger McCurdy. He was standing in front of one of the houses on Tennessee Avenue, its quarterboard reading AHAB-ITAT, and a collection of old harpoons and whalebones mounted on either side of the door; his bicycle leaned against a rail fence behind him, and ranged around him, straddling their bikes, dolled up in pastel-hued jogging suits and sweat clothes, were twenty-six members of the Peach State Ramblers Bicycle Club. Ten men, sixteen women. The women were all in good shape, but most were in their thirties, a bit long in the tooth for Jerry's taste. Ginger, on the other hand, was prime. Twenty-three or twenty-four, with red hair down to her ass and a body that wouldn't quit. She had peeled off her sweats and was blooming out a halter and shorts cut so high that each time she dismounted you could see right up to the Pearly Gates. And she knew what she was doing: every jiggle of those twin jaloobies was aimed at his crotch. She had pressed to the front of the group and was attending to his spiel about the bullshit whaling days. Oh, yeah! Ginger was ready. A couple of lobsters, a little wine, a stroll along the waterfront, and then by God he'd pump her so full of the Nantucket Experience that she'd breach like a snow-white hill.

Thar she fuckin' blows!

"Now, y'all..." he began.

They tittered; they liked him mocking their accent.

He grinned abashedly as if he hadn't known what he was doing. "Must be catchin'" he said. "Now you people probably haven't had a chance to visit the Whaling Museum, have you?"

A chorus of Nos.

"Well then, I'll give you a course in harpoonin'," He pointed at the wall of the AHAB-ITAT. "That top one with the single barb stickin' off the side, that's the kind most commonly used during the whalin' era. That shaft's of ash. That was the preferred wood. It stands up to the weather"—he stared pointedly at Ginger—"and it won't bend under pressure." Ginger tried to constrain a smile. "Now that one," he continued, keeping an eye on her, "the one with the arrow point and no barbs, that was favored by some whalers. They said it allowed for deeper penetration."

"What about the one with two barbs?" asked someone.

Jerry peered over heads and saw that the questioner was his second choice. Ms. Selena Persons. A nice thirtyish brunette, flat-chested, but with killer legs. Despite the fact that he was obviously after Ginger, she hadn't lost interest. Who knows? A double-header might be a possibility.

"That was used toward the end of the whalin' era," he said. "But generally two-barbed harpoons weren't considered as effective as single-barbed ones. I don't know why, exactly. Might have just been stubbornness on the whalers' part. Resistance to change. They knew the ol' single-barb could give satisfaction."

Ms. Persons met his gaze with the glimmer of a smile.

"Course," Jerry continued, addressing all the Ramblers, "now the shaft's tipped with a charge that explodes inside the whale." He winked at Ginger and added *sotto voce*, "Must be a rush."

She covered her mouth with her hand.

"Okay, folks!" Jerry swung his bike away from the fence. "Mount up, and we'll be off to the next thrillin' attraction."

Laughing and chattering, the Ramblers started to mount, but just then a powerful gust of wind swept down Tennessee Avenue, causing squeals and blowing away hats. Several of

the riders overbalanced and fell, and several more nearly did. Ginger stumbled forward and clung to Jerry, giving him chest-to-chest massage. "Nice catch," she said, doing a little writhe as she stepped away.

"Nice toss," he replied.

She smiled, but the smile faded and was replaced with a bewildered look. "What's that?"

Jerry turned. About twenty yards away a column of whirling leaves had formed above the blacktop; it was slender, only a few feet high, and though he had never seen anything similar, it alarmed him no more than had the freakish gust of wind. Within seconds, however, the column had grown to a height of fifteen feet; twigs and gravel and branches were being sucked into it, and it sounded like a miniature tornado. Someone screamed. Ginger clung to him in genuine fright. There was a rank smell in the air, and a pressure was building in Jerry's ears. He couldn't be sure, because the column was spinning so rapidly, but it seemed to be assuming a roughly human shape, a dark green figure made of plant litter and stones. His mouth had gone dry, and he restrained an urge to throw Ginger aside and run.

"Come on!" he shouted.

A couple of the Ramblers managed to mount their bicycles, but the wind had grown stronger, roaring, and it sent them wobbling and crashing into the weeds. The rest huddled together, their hair whipping about, and stared at the great Druid thing that was taking shape and swaying above them, as tall as the treetops. Shingles were popping off the sides of houses, sailing up and being absorbed by the figure; and as Jerry tried to outvoice the wind, yelling at the Ramblers to lie flat, he saw the whalebones and harpoons ripped from the wall of the AHAB-ITAT. The windows of the house exploded outward. One man clutched the bloody flap of his cheek, which had been sliced open by a shard of glass; a woman grabbed the back of her knee and crumpled. Jerry shouted a final warning and pulled Ginger down with him into the roadside ditch. She squirmed and struggled, in a panic, but he forced her head down and held tight. The figure had risen

much higher than the trees, and though it was still swaying, its form had stabilized somewhat. It had a face now: a graveyard smile of gray shingles and two circular patches of stones for eyes: a terrible blank gaze that seemed responsible for the increasing air pressure. Jerry's heart boomed in his inner ear, and his blood felt like sludge. The figure kept swelling, up and up; the roar was resolving into an oscillating hum that shivered the ground. Stones and leaves were beginning to spray out of it. Jerry knew, *knew*, what was going to happen, and he couldn't keep from watching. Amid a flurry of leaves he saw one of the harpoons flit through the air, impaling a woman who had been trying to stand. The force of the blow drove her out of Jerry's field of vision. then the great figure exploded. Jerry squeezed his eyes shut. Twigs and balls of dirt and gravel stung him. Ginger leaped sideways and collapsed atop him, clawing at his hip. He waited for something worse to happen, but nothing did. "You okay?" he asked, pushing Ginger away by the shoulders.

She wasn't okay.

A splintered inch of whalebone stuck out from the center of her forehead. Shrieking with revulsion, Jerry wriggled from beneath her and came to his hands and knees. A moan. One of the men was crawling toward him, his face a mask of blood, a ragged hole where his right eye had been, his good eye looking glazed like a doll's. Horrified, not knowing what to do, Jerry scrambled to his feet and backed away. All the harpoons, he saw, had found targets. Most of the Ramblers lay unmoving, their blood smeared over the blacktop; the rest were sitting up, dazed and bleeding. Jerry's heel struck something, and he spun about. The quarterboard of the AHAB-ITAT had nailed Ms. Selena Persons vampire-style to the roadside dirt; the board had been driven so deep into the ground that only the letter *A* was showing above the mired ruin of her jogging suit, as if she were an exhibit. Jerry began to tremble, and tears started from his eyes.

A breeze ruffled his hair.

Somebody wailed, shocking him from his daze. He should call the hospital, the police. But where was a phone? Most of

the houses were empty, waiting for summer tenants, and the phones wouldn't be working. Somebody must have seen what had happened, though. He should just do what he could until help arrived. Gathering himself, he walked toward the man whose eye was missing, but before he had gone more than a few paces a fierce gust of wind struck him in the back and knocked him flat.

This time the roaring was all around him, the pressure so intense that it seemed a white-hot needle had pierced him from ear to ear. He shut his eyes and clamped both hands to his ears, trying to smother the pain. Then he felt himself lifted. He couldn't believe it at first. Even when he opened his eyes and saw that he was being borne aloft, revolving in a slow circle, it made no sense. He couldn't hear, and the quiet added to his sense of unreality; further adding to it, a riderless bicycle pedaled past. The air was full of sticks and leaves and pebbles, a threadbare curtain between him and the world, and he imagined himself rising in the gorge of that hideous dark figure. Ginger McCurdy was flying about twenty feet overhead, her red hair streaming, arms floating languidly as if in a dance. She was revolving faster than he, and he realized that his rate of spin was increasing as he rose. He saw what was going to happen: you went higher and higher, faster and faster, until you were spewed out, shot out over the village. His mind rebelled at the prospect of death, and he tried to swim back down the wind, flailing, kicking, bursting with fear. But as he whirled higher, twisting and turning, it became hard to breathe, to think, and he was too dizzy to be afraid any longer. Another woman sailed by a few feet away. Her mouth was open, her face contorted; blood dripped from her scalp. She clawed at him, and he reached out to her, not knowing why he bothered. Their hands just missed touching. Thoughts were coming one at a time. Maybe he'd land in the water. MIRACULOUS SURVIVOR OF FREAK TORNADO. Maybe he'd fly across the island and settle gently in a Nantucket treetop. A broken leg, a bruise or two. They'd set up drinks for him in the Atlantic Cafe. Maybe Connie Keating would finally come across, would finally

recognize the miraculous potential of Jerry Highsmith. Maybe. He was tumbling now, limbs jerking about, and he gave up thinking. Flash glimpses of the gapped houses below, of the other dancers on the wind, moving with spasmodic abandon. Suddenly, as he was bent backward by a violent updraft, there was a wrenching pain inside him, a grating, then a vital dislocation that delivered him from pain. Oh, Christ Jesus! Oh, God! Dazzles exploded behind his eyes. Something bright blue flipped past him, and he died.

VI

After the column of leaves and branches looming up from Tennessee Avenue had vanished, after the roaring had died, Hugh Weldon sprinted for his squad car with Peter and Sara at his heels. He frowned as they piled in but made no objection, and this, Peter thought, was probably a sign that he had stopped trying to rationalize events, that he accepted the wind as a force to which normal procedures did not apply. He switched on the siren, and they sped off. But less than fifty yards from the cottage he slammed on the brakes. A woman was hanging in a hawthorn tree beside the road, an old-fashioned harpoon plunged through her chest. There was no point in checking to see if she was alive. All her major bones were quite obviously broken, and she was painted with blood head to foot, making her look like a horrid African doll set out as a warning to trespassers.

Weldon got on the radio. "Body out in Madaket," he said. "Send a wagon."

"You might need more than one," said Sara; she pointed to three dabs of color farther up the road. She was very pale, and she squeezed Peter's hand so hard that she left white imprints on his skin.

Over the next twenty-five minutes they found eighteen bodies: broken, mutilated, several pierced by harpoons or fragments of bone. Peter would not have believed that the human form could be reduced to such grotesque statements, and though he was horrified, nauseated, he became increasingly numbed by what he saw. Odd thoughts flocked to his

brain, most persistent among them being that the violence had been done partly for his benefit. It was a sick, nasty idea, and he tried to dismiss it; but after a while he began to consider it in light of other thoughts that had lately been striking him out of the blue. The manuscript of *How The Wind Spoke as Madaket*, for instance. As improbable as it sounded, it was hard to escape the conclusion that the wind had been seeding all this in his brain. He didn't want to believe it, yet there it was, as believable as anything else that had happened. And given that, was his latest thought any less believable? He was beginning to understand the progression of events, to understand it with the same sudden clarity that had helped him solve the problems of his book, and he wished very much that he could have obeyed his premonition and not touched the combs. Until then the elemental had not been sure of him; it had been nosing around him like—as Sally had described it—a big, stupid animal, sensing something familiar about him but unable to remember what. And when he had found the combs, when he had opened the container, there must have been some kind of circuit closed, a flash point sparked between his power and Gabriela Pascual's, and the elemental had made the connection. He recalled how excited it had seemed, darting back and forth beyond the borders of the aggregate.

As they turned back onto Tennessee Avenue, where a small group of townsfolk were covering bodies with blankets, Weldon got on the radio again, interrupting Peter's chain of logic. "Where the hell are them ambulances?" he snapped.

"Sent 'em a half hour ago," came the reply. "Shoulda been there by now."

Weldon cast a grim look at Peter and Sara. "Try 'em on the radio," he told the operator.

A few minutes later the report came that none of the ambulances were answering their radios. Weldon told his people to stay put, that he'd check it out himself. As they turned off Tennessee Avenue onto the Nantucket road, the sun broke through the overcast, flooding the landscape in a thin yellow light and warming the interior of the car. The

light seemed to be illuminating Peter's weaknesses, making him realize how tense he was, how his muscles ached with the poisons of adrenaline and fatigue. Sara leaned against him, her eyes closed, and the pressure of her body acted to shore him up, to give him a burst of vitality.

Weldon kept the speed at thirty, glancing left and right, but nothing was out of the ordinary. Deserted streets, houses with blank-looking windows. Many of the homes in Madaket were vacant, and the occupants of many of the rest were away at work or off on errands. About two miles out of town, as they crested a low rise just beyond the dump, they spotted the ambulances. Weldon pulled onto the shoulder, letting the engine idle, and stared at the sight. Four ambulances were strewn across the blacktop, forming an effective roadblock a hundred feet away. One had been flipped over on its roof like a dead white bug; another had crashed into a light pole and was swathed in electrical lines whose broken ends were sticking in through the driver's window, humping and writhing and sparking. The other two had been smashed together and were burning; transparent licks of flame warped the air above their blackened husks. But the wrecked ambulances were not the reason that Weldon had stopped so far away, why they sat silent and hopeless. To the right of the road was a field of bleached weeds and grasses, an Andrew Wyeth field glowing yellow in the pale sun, figured by a few stunted oaks and extending to a hill overlooking the sea, where three gray houses were posed against a faded blue sky. Though only fitful breezes played about the squad car, the field was registering the passage of heavy winds; the grasses were rippling, eddying, bending, and swaying in contrary directions, as if thousands of low-slung animals were scampering through them to and fro, and this rippling was so constant, so furious, it seemed that the shadows of the clouds passing overhead were standing still and the land was flowing away. The sound of the wind was a mournful whistling rush. Peter was entranced. The scene had a fey power that weighed upon him, and he had trouble catching his breath.

"Let's go," said Sara tremulously. "Let's..." She stared past

Peter, a look of fearful comprehension forming on her face.

The wind had begun to roar. Less than thirty feet away a patch of grass had been flattened, and a man wearing an orderly's uniform was being lifted into the air, revolving slowly. His head flopped at a ridiculous straw-man angle, and the front of his tunic was drenched with blood. The car shuddered in the turbulence.

Sara shrieked and clutched at Peter. Weldon tried to jam the gearshift into reverse, missed, and the car stalled. He twisted the key in the ignition. The engine sputtered, died, and went dead. The orderly continued to rise, assuming a vertical position. He spun faster and faster, blurring like an ice skater doing a fancy finish, and at the same time drifted closer to the car. Sara was screaming, and Peter wished he could scream, could do something to release the tightness in his chest. The engine caught. But before Weldon could put the car in gear, the wind subsided and the orderly fell onto the hood. Drops of blood sprinkled the windshield. He lay spread-eagled for a moment, his dead eyes staring at them. Then, with the obscene sluggishness of a snail retracting its foot, he slumped down onto the road, leaving a red smear across the white metal.

Weldon rested his head on the wheel, taking deep breaths. Peter cradled Sara in his arms. After a second Weldon leaned back, picked up the radio mike, and thumbed the switch open. "Jack," he said. "This is Hugh. You copy?"

"Loud and clear, Chief?"

"We got a problem out in Madaket." Weldon swallowed hard and gave a little twitch of his head. "I want you to set up a roadblock 'bout five miles from town. No closer. And don't let nobody through, y'understand?"

"What's happenin' out there, Chief? Alice Cuddy called in and said somethin' about a freak wind, but the phone went dead and I couldn't get her back."

"Yeah, we had us some wind." Weldon exchanged a glance with Peter. "But the main problem's a chemical spill. It's under control for now, but you keep everybody away. Madaket's in quarantine."

"You need some help?"

"I need you to do what I told you! Get on the horn and call everyone livin' 'tween the roadblock and Madaket. Tell 'em to head for Nantucket as quick as they can. Put the word on the radio, too."

"What 'bout the folks comin' from Madaket? Do I let 'em through?"

"Won't be nobody comin' that way," said Weldon.

Silence. "Chief, you okay?"

"Hell, yes!" Weldon switched off.

"Why didn't you tell them?" asked Peter.

"Don't want 'em thinkin' I'm crazy and comin' out to check on me," said Weldon. "Ain't no point in them dyin', too." He shifted into reverse. "I'm gonna tell everyone to get in their cellars and wait this damn thing out. Maybe we can figure out somethin' to do. But first I'll take you home and let Sara get some rest."

"I'm all right," she said, lifting her head from Peter's chest.

"You'll feel better after a rest," he said, forcing her head back down: it was an act of tenderness, but also he did not want her to catch sight of the field. Dappled with cloud shadow; glowing palely; some quality of light different from that which shone upon the squad car; it seemed at a strange distance from the road, a view into an alternate universe where things were familiar yet not quite the same. The grasses were rippling more furiously than ever, and every so often a column of yellow stalks would whirl high into the air and scatter, as if an enormous child were running through the field, ripping up handfuls of them to celebrate his exuberance.

"I'm not sleepy," Sara complained; she still hadn't regained her color, and one of her eyelids had developed a tic.

Peter sat beside her on the bed. "There's nothing you can do, so why not rest?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I thought I'd have another go at the combs."

The idea distressed her. He started to explain why he had

to, but instead bent and kissed her on the forehead. "I love you," he said. The words slipped out so easily that he was amazed. It had been a very long time since he had spoken them to anyone other than a memory.

"You don't have to tell me that just because things look bad," she said, frowning.

"Maybe that's why I'm telling you now," he said. "but I don't believe it's a lie."

She gave a dispirited laugh. "You don't sound very confident."

He thought it over. "I was in love with someone once," he said, "and that relationship colored my view of love. I guess I believed that it always had to happen the same way. A nuclear strike. But I'm beginning to understand it can be different, that you can build toward the sound and the fury."

"It's nice to hear," she said, and then, after a pause, "but you're still in love with her, aren't you?"

"I still think about her, but..." He shook his head. "I'm trying to put it behind me, and maybe I'm succeeding. I had a dream about her this morning."

She arched an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"It wasn't a sweet dream," he said. "She was telling me how she'd cemented over her feelings for me 'All that's left,' she said, 'is this little hard place on my breast.' And she told me that sometimes it moved around, twitched, and she showed me. I could see the damn thing jumping underneath her blouse, and when I touched it—she wanted me to—it was unbelievably hard. Like a pebble lodged beneath her skin. A heart stone. That was all that was left of us. Just this piece of hardness. It pissed me off so much that I threw her on the floor. Then I woke up." He scratched his beard, embarrassed by confession. "It was the first time I've ever had a violent thought about her."

Sara stared at him, expressionless.

"I don't know if its' meaningful," he said lamely. "But it seemed do."

She remained silent. Her stare made him feel guilty for having had the dream, sorry that he had mentioned it.

"I don't dream about her very much," he said.

"It's not important," she said.

"Well." He stood. "Try and get some sleep, okay?"

She reached for his hand. "Peter?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you. but you knew that, right?"

It hurt him to see how hesitantly she said it, because he knew that he was to blame for her hesitancy. He bent down and kissed her again. "Sleep," he said. "We'll talk about it later."

He closed the door behind him gently. Mills was sitting at the table, gazing out at 'Sconset Sally, who was pacing the yard, her lips moving, waving her arms, as if arguing with an invisible playmate. "That ol' gal sure's gone down these last years," said Mills. "Used to be sharp as a tack, but she's actin' pretty crazy now."

"Can't blame her," said Peter, sitting down across from Mills. "I'm feeling pretty crazy myself."

"So." Mills tamped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe. "You got a line on what this thing is?"

"Maybe it's the Devil." Peter leaned against the wall. "I don't really know, but I'm starting to think that Gabriela Pascual was right about it being an animal."

Mills chomped on the stem of his pipe and fished in his pocket for a lighter. "How's that?"

"Like I said, I don't really know for sure, but I've been getting more and more sensitized to it ever since I found the combs. At least it seems that way. As if the connection between us were growing stronger." Peter spotted a book of matches tucked under his sugar bowl and slid them across to Mills. "I'm beginning to have some insights into it. When we were out on the road just now, I felt that it was exhibiting an animal trait. Staking out territory. Protecting it from invaders. Look who it's attacked. Ambulances, bicyclists. People who were entering its territory. It attacked us when we visited the aggregate."

"But it didn't kill us," said Mills.

The logical response to Mills's statement surfaced from

Peter's thoughts, but he didn't want to admit to it and shunted it aside. "Maybe I'm wrong," he said.

"Well, if it is an animal, then it can take a hook. All we got to do is find its mouth." Mills grunted laughter, lit his pipe, and puffed bluish smoke. "After you been out on the water a coupla weeks, you can feel when something strange is hard by...even if you can't see it. I ain't no psychic, but seems to me I brushed past this thing once or twice."

Peter glanced up at him. Though Mills was a typical bar-room creature, an old salt with a supply of exotic tales, every now and then Peter could sense about him the sort of specific gravity that accrues to those who have spent time in the solitudes. "You don't seem afraid," he said.

"Oh, don't I?" Mills chuckled. "I'm afraid. I'm just too old to be runnin' 'round in circles 'bout it."

The door flew open, and Sally came in. "Hot in here," she said; she went to the stove and laid a finger against it. "Hmph! Must be all this shit I'm wearin'." She plumped herself down beside Mills, squirmed into a comfortable position, and squinted at Peter. "Goddamn wind won't have me," she said. "It wants *you*."

Peter was startled. "What do you mean?"

Sally pursed her lips as if she had tasted something sour. "It would take me if you wasn't here, but you're too strong. I can't figure a way 'round that."

"Leave the boy alone," said Mills.

"Can't." Sally glowered at him. "He's got to do it."

"You know what she's talkin' 'bout?" asked Mills.

"Hell, yes! He knows! And if he don't, all he's got to do is go talk to it. You understand me, boy. It wants *you*."

An icy fluid squirted down Peter's spine. "Like Gabriela," he said. "Is that what you mean?"

"Go on," said Sally. "Talk to it." She pointed a bony finger at the door. "Just take a stand out there, and it'll come to you."

Behind the cottage, walled off by the spread of two Japanese pines and a toolshed, was a field that the previous tenant had used for a garden. Peter had let it go to seed, and the entire

plot was choked with weeds and litter, gas cans, rusty nails, a plastic toy truck, the decaying hide of a softball, cardboard scraps, this and more resting upon a mat of desiccated vines. It reminded him of the aggregate, and thus seemed an appropriate place to stand and commune with the wind...if such a communion weren't the product of 'Sconset Sally's imagination. Which Peter hoped it was. The afternoon was waning, and it had grown colder. Silver blades of wintery sunlight edged the blackish-gray clouds scudding overhead, and the wind was a steady pour off the sea. He could detect no presence in it, and he was beginning to feel foolish, thinking about going back inside, when a bitter-smelling breeze rippled across his face. He stiffened. Again he felt it: it was acting independent of the offshore wind, touching delicate fingers to his lips, his eyes, fondling him the way a blind man would in trying to know your shape in his brain. It feathered his hair and pried under the pocket flaps of his army jacket like a pet mouse searching for cheese; it frittered with his shoelaces and stroked him between the legs, shriveling his groin and sending a chill washing through his body.

He did not quite understand how the wind spoke to him, yet he had an image of the process as being similar to how a cat will rub against your hand and transmit a static charge. The charge was actual, a mild stinging and popping. Somehow it was translated into knowledge, doubtless by means of his gift. The knowledge was personified, and he was aware that his conceptions were human renderings of inhuman impulses; but at the same time he was certain that they were basically accurate. Most of all it was lonely. It was the only one of its kind, or, if there were others, it had never encountered them. Peter felt no sympathy for its loneliness, because it felt no sympathy for him. It wanted him not as a friend or companion, but as a witness to its power. It would enjoy preening for him, showing off, rubbing against his sensitivity to it and deriving some unfathomable pleasure. It was very powerful. Though its touch was light, its vitality was undeniable, and it was even stronger over the water. The land weakened it, and it was eager to return to the sea with Peter

in tow. Gliding together through the wild canyons of the waves, into a chaos of booming darkness and salt spray, traveling the most profound of all deserts—the sky above the sea—and testing its strength against the lesser powers of the storms, seizing fish and juggling them like silver blades, gathering nests of floating treasures and playing for weeks with the bodies of the drowned. Always at play. Or perhaps “play” was not the right word. Always employed in expressing the capricious violence that was its essential quality. Gabriela Pascual might not have been exact in calling it an animal, but what else could you call it? It was of nature, not of some netherworld. It was ego with thought, power with morality, and it looked upon Peter as a man might look upon a clever toy: something to be cherished for a while, then neglected, then forgotten.

Then lost.

Sara waked at twilight from a dream of suffocation. She sat bolt upright, covered with sweat, her chest heaving. After a moment she calmed herself and swung her legs onto the floor and sat staring into space. In the half-light the dark grain of the boards looked like a pattern of animal faces emerging from the wall; out the window she could see shivering bushes and banks of running clouds. Still feeling sluggish, she went into the front room, intending to wash her face; but the bathroom door was locked and ‘Sconset Sally cawed at her from inside. Mills was snoozing on the sofa bunk, and Hugh Weldon was sitting at the table, sipping a cup of coffee; a cigarette smoldered in the saucer, and that struck her as funny: she had known Hugh all her life and had never seen him smoke.

“Where’s Peter?” she asked.

“Out back,” he said moodily. “Buncha damn foolishness, if you ask me.”

“What is?”

He gave a snort of laughter. “Sally says he’s talkin’ to the goddamn wind.”

Sara felt as if her heart had constricted. “What do you

mean?"

"Beats the hell outta me," said Weldon. "Just more of Sally's nonsense." But when their eyes met she could sense his hopelessness and fear.

She broke for the door. Weldon grabbed at her arm, but she shook free and headed for the Japanese pines back of the cottage. She brushed aside the branches and stopped short, suddenly afraid. The bending and swaying of the weeds revealed a slow circular passage of wind, as if the belly of a great beast were dragging across them, and at the center of the field stood Peter. His eyes were closed, his mouth open, and strands of hair were floating above his head like the hair of a drowned man. The sight stabbed into her, and forgetting her fear, she ran toward him, calling his name. She had covered half the distance between them when a blast of wind smashed her to the ground.

Stunned and disoriented, she tried to get to her feet, but the wind smacked her flat again, pressing her into the damp earth. As had happened out on the aggregate, garbage was rising from the weeds. Scraps of plastic, rusty nails, a yellowed newspaper, rags, and directly overhead, a large chunk of kindling. She was still dazed, yet she saw with peculiar clarity how the bottom of the chunk was splintered and flecked with whitish mold. It was quivering, as if the hand that held it were barely able to restrain its fury. And then, as she realized it was about to plunge down to jab out her eyes and pulp her skull, Peter dived on top of her. His weight knocked the breath out of her, but she heard the piece of kindling *thunk* against the back of his head; she sucked in air and pushed at him, rolling him away, and came to her knees. He was dead-pale.

"Is he all right?"

It was Mills, lumbering across the field. Behind him, Weldon had hold of 'Sconset Sally, who was struggling to escape. Mills had come perhaps a third of the way when the garbage, which had fallen back into the weeds, once more was lifted into the air, swirling, jiggling, and—as the wind produced one of its powerful gusts—hurtling toward him. For a second

he was surrounded by a storm of cardboard and plastic; then this fell away, and he took a staggering step forward. A number of dark dots speckled his face. Sara thought at first they were clots of dirt. Then blood seeped out around them. They were rusty nails. Piercing his brow, his cheeks, pinning his upper lip to his gum. He gave no cry. His eyes bulged, his knees buckled, he did an ungainly pirouette and pitched into the weeds.

Sara watched dully as the wind fluttered about Hugh Weldon and Sally, belling their clothes; it passed beyond them, lashing the pine boughs and vanishing. She spotted the hump of Mills's belly through the weeds. A tear seemed to be carving a cold groove in her cheek. She hiccuped, and thought what a pathetic reaction to death that was. Another hiccup, and another. she couldn't stop. Each successive spasm made her weaker, more unsteady, as if she were spitting up tiny fragments of her soul.

VII

As darkness fell, the wind poured through the streets of the village, playing tricks with the living, the inanimate, and the dead. It was indiscriminate, the ultimate free spirit doing its thing, and yet one might have ascribed a touch of frustration to its actions. Over Warren's Landing it crumpled a sea gull into a bloody rag, and near the mouth of Hither Creek it scattered field mice into the air. It sent a spare tire rolling down the middle of Tennessee Avenue and skied shingles from the roof of the AHAB-ITAT. For a while it flowed about aimlessly; then, increasing to tornado-force, it uprooted a Japanese pine, just yanked it from the ground, dangling huge black root balls, and chunked it like a spear through the side of a house across the street. It repeated the process with two oaks and a hawthorn. Finally it began to blast holes in the walls of the house and snatch the wriggling creatures inside. It blew off old Julia Stackpole's cellar door and sailed it down into the shelves full of preserves behind which she was hiding; it gathered the broken glass into a hurricane of knives that slashed her arms, her face, and— most pertinently—her throat. It found even older George Coffin (who wasn't about to hide, because in his opinion Hugh Weldon was a damned fool) standing in his kitchen, having just stepped back in after lighting his barbecue; it swept up the coals and hurled them at him with uncanny accuracy. Over the space of a half hour it killed twenty-one people and flung their bodies onto their lawns, leaving them to bleed pale in the accumulating dusk. Its fury apparently abated, it dissipated to a breeze and—zip-

ping through the shrubs and pine boughs—it fled back to the cottage, where something it now wanted was waiting in the yard.

VIII

'Sconset Sally sat on the woodpile, sucking at a bottle of beer that she'd taken from Peter's refrigerator. She was as mad as a wet hen because she had a plan—a good plan—and that brainless wonder Hugh Weldon wouldn't hear it, wouldn't listen to a damn word she said. Stuck on being a hero, he was.

The sky had deepened to indigo, and a big lopsided silver moon was leering at her from over the roof of the cottage. She didn't like its eye on her, and she spat toward it. The elemental caught the gob of spit and spun it around high in the air, making it glisten oysterlike. Fool thing! Half monster, half a walloping, invisible dog. It reminded her of that outsized old male of hers, Rommel. One second he'd be going for the mailman's throat, and the next he'd be on his back and wagging his paws, begging for a treat. She screwed her bottle into the grass so it wouldn't spill and picked up a stick of kindling. "Here," she said, and shied the stick. "Fetch." The elemental caught the stick and juggled it for a few seconds, then let it fall at her feet. Sally chuckled. "Me 'n you might get along," she told the air. "'Cause neither one of us gives a shit!" The beer bottle lifted from the grass. She made a grab for it and missed. "Goddamn it!" she yelled. "Bring that back!" the bottle sailed to a height of about twenty feet and tipped over; the beer spilled out, collected in half a dozen large drops that—one by one—exploded into spray, showering her. Sputtering, she jumped to her feet and started to wipe her face; but the elemental knocked her back down. A trickle of fear welled up inside her. The bottle still hovered above

her; after a second it plopped into the grass, and the elemental curled around her, fidgeting with her hair, her collar, slithering inside her raincoat; then, abruptly, as if something else had attracted its attention, it was gone. She saw the grass flatten as it passed over, moving toward the street. She propped herself against the woodpile and finished wiping her face; she spotted Hugh Weldon through the window, pacing, and her anger was rekindled. Thought he was so goddamn masterful, did he? He didn't know piss about the elemental, and there he was, laughing at her plan.

Well, screw him!

He'd find out soon enough that his plan wouldn't work, that hers was the reasonable one, the surefire one.

A little scary, maybe, but surefire all the same.

IX

It had come full dark by the time Peter regained consciousness. He moved his head, and the throbbing nearly caused him to black out. He lay still, getting his bearings. Moonlight spilled through the bedroom window, and Sara was leaning beside it, her blouse glowing a phosphorescent white. From the tilt of her head he judged that she was listening to something, and he soon distinguished an unusual pattern to the wind: five notes followed by a glissando, which led to a repetition of the passage. It was heavy, angry music, an ominous hook that might have been intended to signal the approach of a villain. Shortly thereafter the pattern broke into a thousand skirling notes, as if the wind were being forced through the open stops of a chorus of flutes. Then another passage, this of seven notes, more rapid but equally ominous. A chill, helpless feeling stole over Peter, like the drawing of a morgue sheet. That breathy music was being played for him. It was swelling in volume, as if—and he was certain this was the case—the elemental was heralding his awakening, was once again sure of his presence. It was impatient, and it would not wait for him much longer. Each note drilled that message home. The thought of being alone with it on the open sea terrified him. Yet he had no choice. There was no way to fight it, and it would simply keep on killing until he obeyed. If it weren't for the others he would refuse to go; he would rather die here than submit to that harrowing unnatural relationship. Or was it unnatural? It occurred to him that the history of the wind and Gabriela Pascual had a great deal

in common with the histories of many human relationships. Desiring; obtaining; neglecting; forgetting. It might be that the elemental was some sort of core existence, that at the heart of every relationship lay a howling emptiness, a chaotic music.

"Sara," he said, wanting to deny it.

The moonlight seemed to wrap around her as she turned. She came to sit beside him. "How are you feeling?"

"Woozy." He gestured toward the window. "How long's that been going on?"

"It just started," she said. "It's punched holes in a lot of houses. Hugh and Sally were out a while ago. More people are dead." She brushed a lock of hair from his forehead.

"But..."

"But what?"

"We have a plan."

The wind was playing eerie triplets, an agitated whistling that set Peter's teeth on edge. "It better be a doozy," he said.

"Actually, it's Hugh's plan," she said. "He noticed something out in the field. The instant you touched me, the wind withdrew from us. If it hadn't, if it had hurled that piece of wood at you instead of letting it drop, you would have died. And it didn't want that...at least that's what Sally says."

"She's right. Did she tell you what it does want?"

"Yes." She looked away, and her eyes caught the moonlight; they were teary. "Anyway, we think it was confused, that when we're close together it can't tell us apart. And since it doesn't want to hurt you or Sally, Hugh and I are safe as long as we maintain proximity. If Mills had just stayed where he was..."

"Mills?"

She told him.

After a moment, still seeing Mills's nail-studded face in his mind's eye, he asked, "What's the plan?"

"I'm going to ride in the jeep with Sally, and you're going with Hugh. We'll drive toward Nantucket, and when we reach the dump...you know that dirt road there that leads off into the moors?"

"The one that leads to Altar Rock? Yeah."

"At that point you'll jump into the jeep with us, and we'll head for Altar Rock. Hugh will keep going toward Nantucket. Since it seems to be trying to isolate this end of the island, he figures it'll come after him and we might be able to get beyond its range, and with both of us heading in different directions, we might be able to confuse it enough so that it won't react quickly, and he'll be able to escape, too." She said all this in a rush that reminded Peter of the way a teenager would try to convince her parents to let her stay out late, blurting out the good reasons before they had time to raise any objections.

"You might be right about it not being able to tell us apart when we're close to each other," he said. "God knows how it senses things, and that seems plausible. But the rest is stupid. We don't know whether its territoriality is limited to this end of the island. And what if it does lose track of me and Sally? What's it going to do then? Just blow away? Somehow I doubt it. It might head for Nantucket and do what it's done here."

"Sally says she has a backup plan."

"Christ, Sara!" gingerly, he eased up into a sitting position. "Sally's nuts. She doesn't have a clue."

"Well, what choice do we have?" Her voice broke. "You can't go with it."

"You think I want to? Jesus!"

The bedroom door opened, and Weldon appeared silhouetted in a blur of orange light that hurt Peter's eyes. "Ready to travel?" said Weldon. 'Sconset Sally was at his rear, muttering, humming, producing a human static.

Peter swung his legs off the bed. "This is nuts, Weldon." He stood and steadied himself on Sara's shoulder. "You're just going to get killed." He gestured toward the window and the constant music of the wind. "Do you think you can outrun that in a squad car?"

"Mebbe this plan ain't worth a shit..." Weldon began.

"You got that right!" said Peter. "If you want to confuse the elemental, why not split me and Sally up? One goes with you,

the other with Sara. That way at least there's some logic to this."

"Way I figure it," said Weldon, hitching up his pants, "it ain't your job to be riskin' yourself. It's mine. If Sally, say, goes with me, you're right, that'd confuse it. But so might this. Seems to me it's as eager to keep us normal people in line as it is to run off with freaks like you 'n Sally."

"What..."

"Shut up!" Weldon eased a step closer. "Now if my way don't work, you try yours. And if *that* don't do it, then you can go for a cruise with the damn thing. But we don't have no guarantees it's gonna let anybody live, no matter what you do."

"No, but..."

"No buts about it! This is my bailiwick, and we're gonna do what I say. If it don't work, well, then you can do what you have to. But 'til that happens..."

"'Til that happens you're going to keep on making an ass of yourself," said Peter. "Right? Man, all day you've been looking for a way to assert your fucking authority! You don't have any authority in this situation. Don't you understand?"

Weldon went jaw to jaw with him. "Okay," he said. "You go on out there, Mr. Ramey. Go ahead. Just march on out there. You can use Mills's boat, or if you want something bigger, how 'bout Sally's." He snapped a glance back at Sally. "That okay with you, Sally?" She continued muttering, humming, and nodded her head. "See!" Weldon turned to Peter. "She don't mind. So you go ahead. You draw that son of a bitch away from us if you can." He hitched up his pants and exhaled; his breath smelled like a coffee cup full of cigarette butts. "But if it was me, I'd be 'bout ready to try anything else."

Peter's legs felt rooted to the floor. He realized that he had been using anger to muffle his fear, and he did not know if he could muster up the courage to take a walk out into the wind, to sail away into the terror and nothingness that Gabriela Pascual had faced.

Sara slipped her hand through his arm. "Please, Peter," she

said. "It can't hurt to try."

Weldon backed off a step. "Nobody's blamin' you for bein' scared, Mr. Ramey," he said. "I'm scared myself. But this is the only way I can figure to do my job."

"You're going to die." Peter had trouble swallowing. "I can't let you do that."

"You ain't got nothin' to say 'bout it," said Weldon. "'Cause you got no more authority than me. 'Less you can tell that thing to leave us be. Can you?"

Sara's fingers tightened on Peter's arm, but relaxed when he said, "No."

"Then we'll do 'er my way." Weldon rubbed his hands together in what seemed to Peter hearty anticipation. "Got your keys, Sally?"

"Yeah," she said, exasperated; she moved close to Peter and put a bird-claw hand on his wrist. "Don't worry, Peter. This don't work, I got somethin' up my sleeve. We'll pull a fast one on that devil." She cackled and gave a little whistle, like a parrot chortling over a piece of fruit.

As they drove slowly along the streets of Madaket, the wind sang through the ruined houses, playing passages that sounded mournful and questioning, as if it were puzzled by the movements of the jeep and squad car. The light of a three-quarter moon illuminated the destruction: gaping holes in the walls, denuded bushes, toppled trees. One of the houses had been given a surprised look, an O of a mouth where the door had been, flanked by two shattered windows. Litter covered the lawns. Flapping paperbacks, clothing, furniture, food, toys. And bodies. In the silvery light their flesh was as pale as Swiss cheese, but the wounds dark. They didn't seem real; they might have been part of a gruesome environment created by an avant-garde sculptor. A carving knife skittered along the blacktop, and for a moment Peter thought it would jump into the air and hurtle toward him. He glanced over at Weldon to see how he was taking it all. Wooden Indian profile, eyes on the road. Peter envied him his pose of duty; he wished he had such a role to play,

something that would brace him up, because every shift in the wind made him feel frail and rattled.

They turned onto the Nantucket road, and Weldon straightened in his seat. He checked the rearview mirror, keeping an eye on Sally and Sara, and held the speed at twenty-five. "Okay," he said as they neared the dump and the road to Altar Rock. "I ain't gonna come to a full stop, so when I give the word you move it."

"All right," said Peter; he took hold of the door handle and let out a calming breath. "Good luck."

"Yeah." Weldon sucked at his teeth. "Same to you."

The speed indicator dropped to fifteen, to ten, to five, and the moonlit landscape inched past.

"Go!" shouted Weldon.

Peter went. He heard the squad car squeal off as he sprinted toward the jeep; Sara helped haul him into the back, and then they were veering onto the dirt road. Peter grabbed the frame of Sara's seat, bouncing up and down. The thickets that covered the moors grew close to the road, and branches whipped the sides of the jeep. Sally was hunched over the wheel, driving like a maniac; she sent them skipping over the potholes, swerving around tight corners, grinding up the little hills. There was no time to think, only to hold on and be afraid, to await the inevitable appearance of the elemental. Fear was a metallic taste in Peter's mouth, it was in the white gleam of Sara's eyes as she glanced back at him and the smears of moonlight that coursed along the hood; it was in every breath he took, every trembling shadow he saw. But by the time they reached Altar Rock, after fifteen minutes of so, he had begun to hope, to half-believe, that Weldon's plan had worked.

The rock was almost dead-center of the island, its highest point. It was a barren hill atop which stood a stone where the Indians had once conducted human sacrifices—a bit of history that did no good whatsoever for Peter's nerves. From the crest you could see for miles over the moors, and the rumpled pattern of depressions and small hills had the look of a sea that had been magically transformed to leaves during

a moment of fury. The thickets—bayberry and such—were dusted to a silvery-green by moonlight, and the wind blew steadily, giving no evidence of unnatural forces.

Sara and Peter climbed from the jeep, followed after a second by Sally. Peter's legs were shaky and he leaned against the hood; Sara leaned back beside him, her hip touching his. He caught the scent of her hair. Sally peered toward Madaket. She was still muttering, and Peter made out some of the words.

"Stupid...never would listen to me...never would...son of a bitch...keep it to my goddamn self..."

Sara nudged him. "What do you think?"

"All we can do is wait," he said.

"We're going to be all right," she said firmly; she rubbed the heel of her right hand against the knuckles of her left. It seemed the kind of childish gesture intended to insure good luck, and it inspired him to tenderness. He pulled her into an embrace. Standing there, gazing past her head over the moors, he had an image of them as being the standard lovers on the cover of a paperback, clinging together on a lonely hill, with all probability spread out around them. A corny way of looking at things, yet he felt the truth of it. The dizzying immersion that a paperback lover was supposed to feel. It was not as clear a feeling as he had once had, but perhaps clarity was no longer possible for him. Perhaps all his past clarity had simply been an instance of faulty perception, a flash of immaturity, an adolescent misunderstanding of what was possible. But whether or not that was the case, self-analysis would not solve his confusion. That sort of thinking blinded you to the world, made you disinclined to take risks. It was similar to what happened to academics, how they became so committed to their theories that they began to reject facts to the contrary, to grow conservative in their judgments and deny the inexplicable, the magical. If there was magic in the world—and he knew there was—you could only approach it by abandoning the constraints of logic and lessons learned. For more than a year he had forgotten this and had constructed defenses against magic; now in a single

night they had been blasted away, and at a terrible cost he had been made capable of risking himself again, of hoping.

Then he noticed something that wasted hope.

Another voice had been added to the natural flow of wind from the ocean, and in every direction, as far as the eye could see, the moon-silvered thickets were rippling, betraying the presence of far more wind than was evident atop the hill. He pushed Sara away. She followed his gaze and put a hand to her mouth. The immensity of the elemental stunned Peter. They might have been standing on a crag in the midst of a troubled sea, one that receded into an interstellar dark. For the first time, despite his fear, he had an apprehension of the elemental's beauty, of the precision and intricacy of its power. One moment it could be a tendril of breeze, capable of delicate manipulations, and the next it could become an entity the size of a city. Leaves and branches—like flecks of black space—were streaming up from the thickets, forming columns. Six of them, at regular intervals about Altar Rock, maybe a hundred yards away. The sound of the wind evolved into a roar as they thickened and grew higher. And they grew swiftly. Within seconds the tops of the columns were lost in darkness. They did not have the squat, conical shapes of tornadoes, nor did they twist and jab down their tails; they merely swayed, slender and graceful and menacing. In the moonlight their whirling was almost undetectable and they looked to be made of shining ebony, like six enormous savages poised to attack. They began moving toward the hill. Splintered bushes exploded upward from their bases, and the roaring swelled into a dissonant chord: the sound of a hundred harmonicas being blown at once. Only much, much louder.

The sight of 'Sconset Sally scuttling for the jeep waked Peter from his daze; he pushed Sara into the rear seat and climbed in beside Sally. Though the engine was running, it was drowned out by the wind. Sally drove even less cautiously than before; the island was criss-crossed by narrow dirt roads, and it seemed to Peter that they almost crashed on every one of them. Skidding sideways through a flurry of

bushes, flying over the crests of hills, diving down steep slopes. The thickets grew too high in most places for him to see much, but the fury of the wind was all around them, and once, as they passed a place where the bushes had been burned off, he caught a glimpse of an ebony column about fifty yards away. It was traveling alongside them, he realized. Harrowing them, running them to and fro. Peter lost track of where they were, and he could not believe that Sally had any better idea. She was trying to do the impossible, to drive out the wind, which was everywhere, and her lips were drawn back in a grimace of fear. Suddenly—they had just turned east—she slammed on the brakes. Sara flew halfway into the front seat, and if Peter had not been braced he might have gone through the windshield. Farther along the road one of the columns had taken a stand, blocking their path. It looked like God, he thought. An ebony tower reaching from the earth to the sky, spraying clouds of dust and plant litter from its bottom. And it was moving toward them. Slowly. A few feet per second. But definitely on the move. The Jeep was shaking, and the roar seemed to be coming from the ground beneath them, from the air, from Peter's body, as if the atoms of things were all grinding together. Frozen-face, Sally wrangled with the gearshift. Sara screamed, and Peter, too, screamed as the windshield was sucked out of its frame and whirled off. He braced himself against the dash, but his arms were weak and with a rush of shame he felt his bladder go. The column was less than a hundred feet away, a great spinning pillar of darkness. He could see how the material inside it aligned itself into tightly packed rings like segments of a worm. The air was syrupy, hard to breathe. And then, miraculously, they were swerving away from it, away from the roaring, backing along the road. They turned a corner, and Sally got the jeep going forward; she sent them grinding up a largish hill...and braked. And let her head drop onto the steering wheel in an attitude of despair. They were once again at Altar Rock.

And Hugh Weldon was waiting for them.

He was sitting with his head propped against the boulder

that gave the place its name. His eyes were filled with shadows. His mouth was open, and his chest rose and fell. Labored breathing, as if he had just run a long way. There was no sign of the squad car. Peter tried to call to him, but his tongue was stuck to his palate and all that came out was a strangled grunt. He tried again.

"Weldon!"

Sara started to sob, and Sally gasped. Peter didn't know what had frightened them and didn't care; for him the process of thought had been thinned down to following one track at a time. He climbed from the jeep and went over to the chief. "Weldon," he said again.

Weldon sighed.

"What happened?" Peter knelt beside him and put a hand on his shoulder; he heard a hiss and felt a tremor pass through the body.

Weldon's right eye began to bulge. Peter lost his balance and sat back hard. Then the eye popped out and dropped into the dust. With a high-pitched whistling, wind and blood sprayed from the empty socket. Peter fell backward, scrabbling at the dirt in an effort to put distance between himself and Weldon. The corpse toppled onto its side, its head vibrating as the wind continued to pour out, boiling up dust beneath the socket. There was a dark smear marking the spot on the boulder where the head had rested.

Until his heart rate slowed, Peter lay staring at the moon, as bright and distant as a wish. He heard the roaring of the wind from all sides and realized it was growing louder, but he didn't want to admit to it. Finally, though, he got to his feet and gazed out across the moors.

It was as if he were standing at the center of an unimaginably large temple, one forested with dozens upon dozens of shiny black pillars rising from a dark green floor. The nearest of them were about a hundred yards away, and those were unmoving; but as Peter watched, others farther off began to slew back and forth, gliding in and out of the stationary ones, like dancing cobras. There was a fever in the air, a pulse of heat and energy, and this as much as the alieness of the sight

was what transfixed him and held him immobile. He found that he had gone beyond fear. You could no more hide from the elemental than you could from God. It would lead him on to the sea to die, and its power was so compelling that he almost acknowledged its right to do this. He climbed into the jeep. Sara looked beaten. Sally touched his leg with a palsied hand.

"You can use my boat," she said.

On the way back to Madaket, Sara sat with her hands clasped in her lap, outwardly calm but inwardly turbulent. Thoughts fired across her brain so quickly that they left only partial impressions, and those were seared away by lightning strokes of terror. She wanted to say something to Peter, but words seemed inadequate to all she was feeling. At one point she decided to go with him, but the decision sparked a sudden resentment. He didn't love her! Why should she sacrifice herself for him? Then, realizing that he was sacrificing himself for her, that he did love her or that at least this was an act of love, she decided that if she went it would make his act meaningless. That decision caused her to question whether or not she was using sacrifice to obscure her true reason for staying behind; her fear. And what about the quality of her feelings for him? Were they so uncertain that fear could undermine them? In a blaze of irrationality she saw that he was pressuring her to go with him, to prove her love, something she had never asked him to do. What right did he have? With half her mind she understood the unreasonableness of these thoughts, yet she couldn't stop thinking them. She felt all her emotions winnowing, leaving her hollow...like Hugh Weldon, with only the wind inside him, propping him up, giving him the semblance of life. The grotesqueness of the image caused her to shrink further inside herself, and she just sat there, growing dim and empty, saying nothing.

"Buck up," said Sally out of the blue, and patted Peter's leg. "We got one thing left to try." And then, with what seemed to Sara an irrational good cheer, she added: "But if

that don't work, the boat's got fishin' tackle and a coupla cases of cherry brandy on board. I was too damn drunk to unload 'em yesterday. Cherry brandy be better'n water for where you're headed."

Peter gave no reply.

As they entered the village, the elemental chased beside them, whirling up debris, scattering leaves, tossing things high into the air. Playing, thought Sara. It was playing. Frisking along like a happy pup, like a petulant child who'd gotten his way and now was all smiles. She was overwhelmed with hatred for it, and she dug her nails into the seat cushion, wishing she had a way to hurt it. Then, as they passed Julia Stackpole's house, the corpse of Juila Stackpole sat up. Its bloody head hung down, its frail arms flapping. The entire body appeared to be vibrating, and with a horrid disjointed motion, amid a swirling of papers and trash, it went rolling over and over and came to rest against a broken chair. Sara shrank back into a corner of the seat, her breath ragged and shallow. A thin cloud swept free of the moon, and the light measurably brightened, making the gray of the houses seem gauzy and immaterial; the holes in their sides looked real enough—black, cavernous—as if the walls and doors and windows had only been a facade concealing emptiness.

Sally parked next to a boathouse a couple of hundred yards north of Smith Point: a rickety wooden structure the size of a garage. Beyond it a stretch of calm black water was figured by a blaze of moonlight. "You gonna have to row out to the boat," Sally told Peter. "Oars are in here." She unlocked the door and flicked on a light. The inside of the place was a dilapidated as Sally herself. Raw boards; spiderwebs spanning between paint cans and busted lobster traps; a jumble of two-by-fours. Sally went stumping around, mumbling and kicking things, searching for the oars; her footsteps set the light bulb dangling from the roof to swaying, and the light slopped back and forth over the walls like dirty yellow water. Sara's legs were leaden. It was hard to move, and she thought maybe this was because there weren't any moves left. Peter took a few steps toward the center of the boathouse

and stopped, looking lost. His hands twitched at his sides. She had the idea that his expression mirrored her own: slack, spiritless, with bruised crescents under his eyes. She moved, then. The dam that had been holding back her emotions burst, and her arms were around him, and she was telling him that she couldn't let him go alone, telling him half-sentences, phrases that didn't connect. "Sara," he said. "Jesus." He held her very tightly. The next second, though, she heard a dull *thunk* and he sagged against her, almost knocking her down, and slumped to the floor. Brandishing a two-by-four, Sally bent to him and struck again.

"What are you doing?" Sara screamed it and began to wrestle with Sally. Their arms locked, they waltzed around and around for a matter of seconds, the light bulb jiggling madly. Sally sputtered and fumed; spittle glistened on her lips. Finally, with a snarl, she shoved Sara away. Sara staggered back, tripped over Peter, and fell sprawling beside him.

"Listen!" Sally cocked her head and pointed to the roof with the two-by-four. "Goddamn it! It's workin'!"

Sara came warily to her feet. "What are you talking about?"

Sally picked up her fisherman's hat, which had fallen off during the struggle, and squashed it down onto her head. "The wind, goddamn it! I told that stupid son of a bitch Hugh Weldon, but oh, no! He never listened to anybody."

The wind was rising and fading in volume, doing so with such a regular rhythm that Sara had the impression of a creature made of wind running frantically back and forth. Something splintered in the distance.

"I don't understand," said Sara.

"Unconscious is like dead to it," said Sally; she gestured at Peter with the board. "I knew it was so, 'cause after it did for Mills it came for me. It touched me up all over, and I could tell it'd have me, then. but that stupid bastard wouldn't listen. Had to do things his goddamn way!"

"It would have you?" Sara glanced down at Peter, who was unstimulating, bleeding from the scalp. "You mean instead of Peter?"

"Course that's what I mean." Sally frowned. "Don't make

no sense him goin'. Young man with all his future ahead. Now me..." She yanked at the lapel of her raincoat as if intending to throw herself away. "What I got to lose? A coupla years of bein' alone. I ain't eager for it, y'understand. But it don't make sense any other way. Tried to tell Hugh that, but he was stuck on bein' a goddamn hero."

Her bird-bright eyes glittered in the webbed flesh, and Sara had a perception of her that she had not had since childhood: the zany old spirit, half-mad but with one eye fixed on some corner of creation that nobody else could see. She remembered all the stories. Sally trying to signal the moon with a hurricane lamp; Sally rowing through a nor'easter to pluck six sailors off Whale Shoals; Sally passing out dead-drunk at the ceremony the Coast Guard had given in her honor; Sally loosing her dogs on the then-junior senator from Massachusetts when he had come to present her a medal. Crazy Sally. She suddenly seemed valuable to Sara.

"You can't..." she began, but broke off and stared at Peter.

"Can't not," said Sally, and clucked her tongue. "You see somebody looks after my dogs.

Sara nodded.

"And you better check on Peter," said Sally. "See if I hit him too hard."

Sara started to comply but was struck by a thought. "Won't it know better this time? Peter was knocked out before. Won't it have learned?"

"I suppose it can learn," said Sally. "But it's real stupid, and I don't think it's figured this out." She gestured at Peter. "Go ahead. See if he's all right."

The hairs on Sara's neck prickled as she knelt beside Peter, and she was later to reflect that in the back of her mind she had known what was about to happen. But even so she was startled by the blow.

X

It wasn't until late the next afternoon that the doctors allowed Peter to have visitors other than the police. He was still suffering from dizziness and blurred vision, and mentally speaking, he alternated between periods of relief and depression. Seeing in his mind's eye the mutilated bodies, the whirling black pillars. Tensing as the wind prowled along the hospital walls. In general he felt walled off from emotion, but when Sara came into the room those walls crumbled. He drew her down beside him and buried his face in her hair. They lay for a long time without speaking, and it was Sara who finally broke the silence.

"Do they believe you?" she asked. "I don't think they believe me."

"They don't have much choice," he said. "I just think they don't want to believe it."

After a moment she said, "Are you going away?"

He pulled back from her. She had never looked more beautiful. Her eyes were wide, her mouth drawn thin, and the strain of all that had happened to them seemed to have carved an unnecessary ounce of fullness from her face. "that depends on whether or not you'll go with me," he said. "I don't want to stay. Whenever the wind changes pitch, every nerve in my body signals an air raid. But I won't leave you. I want to marry you."

Her reaction was not what he had expected. She closed her eyes and kissed him on the forehead—a motherly, understanding kiss; then she settled back on the pillow, gazing

calmly at him.

"That was a proposal," he said. "didn't you catch it?"

"Marriage?" She seemed perplexed by the idea.

"Why not? We're qualified." He grinned. "We both have concussions."

"I don't know," she said. "I love you, Peter, but..."

"But you don't trust me?"

"Maybe that's part of it," she said, annoyed. "I don't know."

"Look." He smoothed down her hair. "Do you know what really happened in the boathouse last night?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"I'll tell you. What happened was that an old woman gave her life so you and I could have a chance at something." She started to speak, but he cut her off. "That's the bones of it. I admit the reality's a bit more murky. God knows why Sally did what she did. Maybe saving lives was a reflex of her madness, maybe she was tired of living. Maybe it just seemed a good idea at the time. And as for us, we haven't exactly been Romeo and Juliet. I've been confused, and I've confused you. And aside from whatever problems we might have as a couple, we have a lot to forget. Until you came in I was feeling shell-shocked, and that's a feeling that's probably going to last for a while. But like I said, the heart of the matter is that Sally died to give us a chance. No matter what her motives, what our circumstances, that's what happened. And we'd be fools to let that chance slip away." He traced the line of her cheekbone with a finger. "I love you. I've loved you for a long time and tried to deny it, to hold on to a dead issue. But that's all over."

"We can't make this sort of decision now," she murmured

"Why not?"

"You said it yourself. You're shell-shocked. So am I. And I don't know how I feel about...everything."

"Everything? You mean me?"

She made a noncommittal noise, closed her eyes, and after a moment she said, "I need time to think."

In Peter's experience when women said they needed time

to think, nothing good ever came of it. "Jesus!" he said angrily. "Is this how it has to be between people? One approaches, the other avoids, and then they switch roles. Like insects whose mating instincts have been screwed up by pollution." He registered what he had said and had a flash-feeling of horror. "Come on, Sara! We're past that kind of dance, aren't we? It doesn't have to be marriage, but let's commit to something. Maybe we'll make a mess of it, maybe we'll end up boring each other. But let's try. It might not be any effort at all." He put his arms around her, brought her tight against him, and was immersed in a cocoon of heat and weakness. He loved her, he realized, with an intensity that he had not believed he could recapture. His mouth had been smarter than his brain for once—either that or he had talked himself into it. The reasons didn't matter.

"For Christ's sake, Sara!" he said. "Marry me. Live with me. Do something with me!"

She was silent; her left hand moved gently over his hair. Light, distracted touches. Tucking a curl behind his ear, toying with his beard, smoothing his mustache. As if she were making him presentable. He remembered how that other long-ago woman had become increasingly silent and distracted and gentle in the days before she had dumped him.

"Damn it!" he said with a growing sense of helplessness. "Answer me!"

XI

On the second night out 'Sconset Sally caught sight of a winking red light off her port bow. Some ship's riding light. It brought a tear to her eye, making her think of home. But she wiped the tear away with the back of her hand and had another slug of cherry brandy. The cramped wheelhouse of the lobster boat was cozy and relatively warm; beyond, the moonlit plain of the sea was rising in light swells. Even if you didn't have nowhere to go, she thought, wheels and keels and wings gave a boost to your spirit. She laughed. Especially if you had a supply of cherry brandy. She had another slug. A breeze curled around her arm and tugged at the neck of the bottle. "Goddamn it!" she squawked. "Get away!" She batted at the air as if she could shoo away the elemental, and hugged the bottle to her breast. Wind uncoiled a length of rope on the deck behind her, and then she could hear it moaning about the hull. She staggered to the wheelhouse door. "Whoo-oo-ooh!" she sang, mocking it. "Don't be making your godawful noises at me, you sorry bastard! Go kill another goddamn fish if you want somethin' to do. Just leave me alone to my drinkin'."

Waves surged up on the port side. Big ones, like black teeth. Sally almost dropped the bottle in her surprise. Then she saw they weren't really waves but shapes of water made by the elemental. "You're losin' your touch, asshole!" she shouted. "I seen better'n that in the movies!" She slumped beside the door, clutching the bottle. The word *movies* conjured flashes of old films she'd seen, and she started singing songs from

them. She did "Singin' in the Rain" and "Blue Moon" and "Love Me Tender." She knocked back swallows of brandy in between the verses, and when she felt primed enough she launched into her favorite. "The sound that you hear," she bawled, "is the sound of Sally! A joy to be heard for a thousand years." she belched. "The hills are alive with the sound of Sally..." She couldn't recall the next line, and that ended the concert.

The wind built to a howl around her, and her thoughts sank into a place where there were only dim urges and nerves fizzling and blood whining in her ears. Gradually she surfaced from it and found that her mood had become one of regret. Not about anything specific. Just general regrets. General Regrets. She pictured him as an old fogey with a white walrus mustache and a Gilbert-and-Sullivan uniform. Epaullets the size of skateboards. She couldn't get the picture out of her head, and she wondered if it stood for something important. If it did, she couldn't make it come clear. Like that line of her favorite song, it had leaked out through one of her cracks. Life had leaked out the same way, and all she could remember of it was a muddle of lonely nights and sick dogs and scallop shells and half-drowned sailors. Nothing important sticking up from the muddle. No monument to accomplishment or romance. Hah! She'd never met the man who could do what men said they could. The most reasonable men she'd known were those shipwrecked sailors, and their eyes big and dark as if they'd seen into some terrible bottomland that had sheared away their pride and stupidity. Her mind began to whirl, trying to get a fix on life, to pin it own like a dead butterfly and know its patterns, and soon she realized that she was literally whirling. Slowly, but getting faster and faster. She hauled herself up and clung to the wheelhouse door and peered over the side. The lobster boat was spinning around and around on the lip of a bowl of black water several hundred yards across. A whirlpool. Moonlight struck a glaze down its slopes but didn't reach the bottom. Its roaring, heart-stopping power scared her, made her giddy and faint. But after a moment she banished fear. So this was

death. It just opened up and swallowed you whole. All right. That was fine by her. She slumped against the wheelhouse and drank deeply of the cherry brandy, listening to the wind and the singing of her blood as she went down not giving a damn. It sure beat puking up life a gob at a time in some hospital room. She kept slurping away at the brandy, guzzling it, wanting to be as looped as possible when the time came. But the time didn't come, and before too long she noticed that the boat had stopped spinning. The wind had quieted and the sea was calm.

A breeze coiled about her neck, slithered down her breast, and began curling around her legs, flipping the hem of her dress. "You bastard," she said soddenly, too drunk to move. The elemental swirled around her knees, belling the dress, and touched her between the legs. It tickled, and she swatted at it ineffectually, as if it were one of the dogs snooting at her. But a second later it prodded her there again, a little harder than before, rubbing back and forth, and she felt a quiver of arousal. It startled her so that she went rolling across the deck, somehow keeping her bottle upright. That quiver stuck with her, though, and for an instant a red craving dominated the broken mosaic of her thoughts. Cackling and scratching herself, she staggered to her feet and leaned on the rail. The elemental was about fifty yards off the port bow, shaping itself a waterspout, a moonstruck column of blackness, from the placid surface of the sea.

"Hey!" she shouted, wobbling along the rail. "You come on back here. *I'll* teach you a new trick!"

The waterspout grew higher, a glistening black serpent that *whooshed* and sucked the boat toward it; ; but it didn't bother Sally. A devilish joy was in her, and her mind crackled with lightnings of pure craziness. She thought she had figured out something. Maybe nobody had ever taken a real interest in the elemental, and maybe that was why it eventually lost interest in them. Wellsir! She had an interest in it. Damn thing couldn't be any more stupid than some of her Dobermans. Snooted like one, for sure. She'd teach it to roll over and beg and who knows what else. Fetch me that fish, she'd tell it.

Blow me over to Hyannis and smash the liquor-store window and bring me six bottles of brandy. She'd show it who was the boss. And could be one day she'd sail into the harbor at Nantucket with the thing on a leash. 'Sconset Sally and her pet storm, Scourge of the Seven Seas.

The boat was beginning to tip and slew sideways in the pull of the waterspout, but Sally scarcely noticed. "Hey!" she shouted again, and chuckled. "Maybe we can work things out! Maybe we're meant for each other!" She tripped over a warp in the planking, and the arm holding the bottle flailed above her head. Moonlight seemed to stream down into the bottle, igniting the brandy so that it glowed like a magic elixir, a dark red ruby flashing from her hand. Her maniacal laugh went sky-high.

"You come on back here!" she screeched at the elemental, exulting in the wild frequencies of her life, at the thought of herself in league with this idiot god, and unmindful of her true circumstance, of the thundering around her and the tiny boat slipping toward the foaming base of the waterspout. "Come back here, damn it! We're two of a kind! We're birds of a feather! I'll sing you to sleep each night! You'll serve me my supper! I'll be your old cracked bride, and we'll have a hell of a honeymoon while it lasts!"

THE SUMMER PEOPLE

by Robert Frazier

1

Past midnight, and the air smells of smoke and something else: decayed seaweed, wet sand, fear. A three-quarter moon rolls like a silver coin through high banks of fog, in and out of focus. The world is spinning.

The man tumbles on the grassy dune in his Hawaiian shirt and shorts, struggling to unravel the cloth strips that bind his wrists behind him and cut into his ankles. He's kicked again in the small of the back. Not hard, but hard enough to roll him one more time. A thin hand tugs at his chin and turns his head up. He looks into the sallow, shadow-eyed face of a boy, no, it seems to be a girl. A pre-teen with the wild expression of a gorilla, or a baboon, or any beast rampant with fear and hunger. The kid punches him. Pushes him onto his back. Kicks him repeatedly in the mouth until the blood wells in

his throat and chokes him. He swallows hard, digs his heels in, trips his assailant with a swing of his legs. After the kid stands again, she pulls a trifle from a clump of beach grasses that waves in the sea breeze, a shiny object that's caught her interest.

After all, isn't the girl just a child? Not a monster.

Just a kid who's stooped over and found a trinket that's pointed and shiny.

Squealing noises through his gag. Loud, ragged breathing through his nose. He's pushing himself along the beach like a hit-and-run dog with a busted pelvis. He can still use his legs, can't he? There's a bonfire flickering a ways down the beach, isn't there?.

But he can't see the kid. Pains begin to lance up his calves. His nerves ignite. He tries to kick again, kick blindly, but there's a hot, numb feeling where his legs should be; they aren't responding.

And it's the fire licking through his nerves and into his lungs that rages out of control.

Angel lurched forward as he awoke. His back hurt where it had pressed into the molded seat. Sweat beaded on his forehead and neck. A warm breeze blew over the pilot house and top deck of the steamship at twilight, ruffling his hair and causing goosebumps to rise on his arms. He'd had another flash about one of the summer people, about another of the horrors they visited upon each other. Something was wrong with them—he was almost certain of it.

Angel had tracked them in the view finder of his camera as they stepped off the gangway in May, their faces set with determination, their internal dials set on full-tilt boogie. The first invasion was spearheaded by flawless blondes from Radcliffe and UConn who offered up their chesty references to restaurateurs, and too, the Yale and Brandeis boys with the eager amorality of junior senators. Next came the undergraduates in Everything-Healthy-and-Holy who sought out mindless, physical labor in accord with the teachings of their latest Swami. Then the art students that sought the pleasure

secrets of Mad Dog Manor or the trail to Lost Virgin Beach, and who most often intruded on Angel's life, wanting to photograph him in turn because he was an albino. And the entrepreneurs, like Splash 'N' Cash Painters crewed by those destined for partnerships in daddy's brokerage firm, or death by AIDS. As usual, the same as every year. All to provide services for the second wave, who, though older and richer and presumably wiser, did not differ in any fundamental way; yet there was one thing different about them this year, one thing that Angel had never seen before, because never before this summer had he been able to see into the light of their beings or visualize their darkest secrets. Within weeks of their moving in and finding jobs that Spring, he'd envisioned a series of attacks, and a murder, perhaps, that interrupted their hard-working, hard-playing lifestyle.

The whole island whispered rumors of these incidents, for some became public knowledge. His landlady, Lilith Greenleaf, claimed that they revealed more than the mere paucities of heart the off-islanders brought with them. More like a quickening in malaise, due perhaps to internal pressures. Or else—and Angel had a suspicion this was the case—due to a carious, outside influence. Angel wanted to know what blurred the color in their auras and obscured their faces, giving them the countenances of demigods from the mean streets of Valhalla. He wanted to know what caused an undercurrent of dread in such a quaint seaside paradise. Lilith had her theories, private theories, yet it seemed imperative that he find out the truth for himself. Angel often felt close, just not close enough.

But summer people and some aren't, as Lilith told him, relegating them to the status of a subspecies, and though Angel tried to capture their plight in one classic photograph, like the mental image he'd constructed of all the crazed buddies he made during the war, he'd ended up wasting dozens of rolls of film. Their expressions were too elusive, too subtle, and of course the auras did not show in the developed prints. Now, this Sunday evening ferry returning from Hyannis was packed with them, and though Angel felt

tempted to load his camera again, he also felt overwhelmed and angered by personal news he'd received from his optometrist on the Cape. He was losing his eyesight. The whole goddamn nine yards. And faster than he'd first guessed. To hell with it. All of it. He let his failing eyes dissemble the passengers to meaningless blobs of color along the rail. He tried to ignore the vocal snippets that floated above the drone of their conversation.

"You hear about the girl attacked in the alley..." "Hey, we got so drunk we went looking for the bastards..." "Wax that, man, I said. I mean, shit. I told him, let's forget it and hit the surf..." "Geez, did you know they found a body washed up out at 'Sconset..."

As the steamship sounded its horn and churned into Nantucket harbor, nosing around the throbbing red beacon of a lighthouse on the sandy point, it appeared to Angel as if the last wash of twilight hung in a shroud over the island, a damping field that made the town's roof tops slump, the trees turn shapeless and cottony, and the narrow streets look like doorways into an undiscovered country from which no traveler returns. Faint odors of diesel fuel and brine and fried foods carried on a cool wind that rocked the sailboats at anchor, keening through their rigging and snapping loose lines against masts. The result sounded like atonal music. Angel felt as if the surface gloss of the island had receded with the tides, exposing its substrata: the barnacles, the collapsed pilings, the decline in its social conscience. Standing and leaning forward on the rail, he strained to make out wharf buildings as indistinct as omens, and to decipher reflections on the dark water ahead; it all fused into a blur. He had no clue as to his role in the unfolding events here, though he sensed that he would play a role.

Several college kids stirred from the railing beside him, as if this dusky scenery had disturbed them, caught them in a strong gust of somber images. They edged toward their own kind, and Angel was glad of it. He was wearing his old fatigue jacket, and it seemed, as sometimes it did, to be giving off the smell of conflict, of burnt phosphorous and adrenalin

and the overheated barrel of an M-60. Their stares were hostile, ridiculing. He heard them talking about his albinism, and the problems it must give him, as if that ever concerned anyone before. They began to joke.

"Yeah, Lance tried talkin' to that guy in the Army duds. Kinda looks like Johnny Winter, you know. What a trip that must have..."

No longer needing to protect his weak eyes, Angel removed his shades and hooked them in the breast pocket of his jacket. Back on shore, distant floodlights switched on and illuminated the white towers of two churches; they stood in clear relief—sentinels offering solace to world-weary loners like himself, a refuge from high technology and low morale. He rolled his jacket sleeves down to ward off the sudden chill he felt, though he shivered anyway, upset by the morbid twists his mind had taken. He plowed with graceless strides through a loud circle of beer drinkers mingling beside the stairwell.

"When I talked to her on the phone, she sounded worried about, well, going out..." "Same with Lucy..."

The stairs were backed up with people going below deck for luggage or to their cars, so he took a seat inside a lively circle of kids playing around the deck chairs. Their game took on a dreamy, timeless quality for Angel while the ship reversed its engines in a slow rumble to turn its nose toward shore. And, too, the children wore healthy golden auras.

Going blind, after all, had its moments.

A towhead girl of ten sat beside him to cheer on her friends, and Angel stared at the aura around the girl's head. It looked at once familiar, yet unique enough that he knew he'd never seen it. Lilith Greenleaf would have called it sickly. Lilith mapped brain activity with her New Age crystal techniques, and since Angel had agreed to act as a test subject, the auras that he'd considered a part of his visual deterioration began to show louder and clearer on most everyone he met. Thus he'd seen more of what wasn't there, while seeing progressively less and less of what was, and though he'd observed the ill state of some of the young and privileged, he found

the vast majority of them to be healthy when they arrived: their auras veined in faint turquoise, golden threads or greenish vines. This girl's color, however, was mud brown, and bright orange charges flared through it when she coughed, which was often. Her face looked thin, her eye sockets smudged with ashes. After a moment, she walked off to talk to her friends, leaving her mother in the deck chair beyond, a matron at mid-life in elegant yet dated clothes of black and white with a red scarf. The woman possessed an athletic figure and girlish, auburn red hair, yet in the waning light, Angel sensed an unhealthy tension in her. The tawny glow about her rippled with worry and concern.

"Hey, is your little girl okay?" he asked her. "Hey?"

"I'm sorry," she said in surprise, though after a delay, as if she considered it rude for strangers to address her. "Are you talking to me?"

He was tired of this treatment. Everyone scorned the way he looked and dressed. That and his bone-white skin and even whiter hair.

"Your kid, lady. Your girl. She looks bad, you know."

"Doesn't make it your business. Are you a doctor?"

"Was. A medic."

"Right! And what do medics know?"

"My father looked like her after his chemotherapy. I know that much. He looked drained. Dead and warmed over. She should see a specialist or something."

"What makes you think I haven't?"

"You'd have said so. You know, it could be leukemia. Like with my pa."

"Bronchial asthma," the woman said with finality.

"It's got to be worse than that."

The woman looked up with striking blue eyes that burned through him like sunlight focused through a lens. She stood with an abrupt jerk and gathered her purse with a silk jacket, looking more guilty than affronted as she walked off at a brisk clip. The truth came to him in a revelatory flash.

The woman cries alone while her child plays in blissful ignorance on the green yard of a big summer estate. The estate sits along a bluff overlooking the town and harbor. The girl feels weak as she looks down at the roof tops, then the jetties beyond. She feels a dull lethargy in her muscles and bones.

Angel shared her terrible secret now. The mother knew the truth just as he did. Her daughter *was* dying of leukemia.

God, he felt miserable. Tragedies like this became more and more transparent to him through the flashbacks, and though he'd been hardened against life by his mid-thirties, something inside him softened with every new blow, every glimpse of other people's private misfortunes. He didn't know how many more he could take.

To add to the problem, he suffered from splitting headaches that came on without warning, and they seemed to follow from the first time he'd guinea-pigged for Lilith. Not that he blamed her. Her healing sessions with the crystals tied in with it, perhaps accelerated his perceptivity, but that had nothing to do with going blind. He'd been doing that for years since the war. Now, he was unsure if he should inform Lilith of the optometrist's results he'd heard that afternoon. She took her practices seriously, and despite their off-then-on bouts as lovers, despite the attractive muscularity of her long tan legs and the goddess-like set of her Greek bones, he didn't care to risk an extra battery of healing sessions. His heightened sensitivities bothered him more than he cared to admit, hurt him in ways that even made the headaches seem trivial. He felt like gliding. Just seeing where the current might take him next.

The ship completed its turn-around, easing toward the dock, and Angel became aware of someone watching him from a couple yards to his left, a seven-foot black man whose immense belly leaked out between the halves of a crisp black suit. Hugie Lewis, a tour guide from the island with a reputation for eating copious helpings of Portuguese food, giving tour lectures while piss drunk, and offering summer girls a

thumbnail of coke for a blow job; his legacy of physical and moral decline approached an absolute. He was probably snooping out tour fares for the coming weekend. Or sizing up the chicks. Maybe he was bored enough to find amusement in the minor drama Angel had just played out.

As he leaned back against the rail, Hugie appeared to phase slightly from reality, the skin of his face and hands glistening with an oily sheen. Angel realized it was Hugie's aura, and he looked closely at the dark surface of it. He saw no countenance save that of an amoeba prepared to devour all in its path. The aura appeared to expand about Hugie, making Angel queasy as it rippled slowly, then ballooned towards him as Hugie moved closer. The darkness engulfed Angel for a moment, blocking out everything. He was awash in a sea of slippery gruel, sliding down the sides of a maelstrom pool that spun faster and faster. He struggled to break free. Lamp-black tendrils lashed around him. Trying to work there way inside him, into his guts. His mind panicked. He gasped like a fish out of water, feeling drawn toward the center of a hungry void, toward an unstoppable dissolution. Then something snapped, and Angel felt his head clear. Hugie had moved farther down the rail, not closer.

Angel tried to shrug the incident off as a dizzy spell when his vision had played tricks on him and his heart sank like ballast within his chest. He tried to blame it on a blackout. This was futile. He sensed that Hugie contained a concentrated dose of what ailed the summer people, like an ignorant consumer who'd eaten contaminated shellfish until his toxin levels far exceeded that of a given meal. Angel felt an acute wariness toward the man, and Angel feared how angry he became when he was that upset and alarmed. Back in his youth, he'd have taught this motherfucker a lesson about staring. Given him a tutorial alongside the head. Speared that dark tumor at the core of the bastard's stomach with his boot toe. That was the old Angel.

Instead, as he stood and entered the traffic that had begun to flow unhindered down the steep stairs, descending two levels into the bowels of the ship, he grew faint. Almost losing

his footing. Almost losing everything before he made it home. Whatever had marked him as a unhealthy man wasn't about to let him forget. Not at all. Not one bit.

Nor was Angel about to stop fighting it, either.

2

The pizza slice sat like a lump in Angel's stomach, and a chill mounted the rungs of his backbone as he was jostled by a crowd on the sidewalk outside the movie theater. The island was full to the brim with the haughty and the haute couture, true, yet he sensed something different in his love-hate resentment towards their invasion, the same cold and sinister emotion that underpinned most of the natives' attitudes this year toward them. It bothered Angel that he might share this, at least, with the likes of Hugie Lewis. He felt a shaking spell coming on.

He wondered how he'd avoided it so long.

Pains begin to lance up his calves. His nerves ignite.

Cutting past the brightly lit windows of the Atlantic Cafe, he hurried away from the crowds, his head beginning to spin, to send dark spots before him that geysered like reverse images of an explosion; and though most of the spots faded quickly, the survivors jitterbugged and bled fine lines about them until pulsing spiders seemed to crawl through a shadowy foliage that grew before his eyes. His legs gave out, and he sat on a bench in the shadows beside the North Wharf Fish House, a restaurant with a bluefish and a carving knife on their posted menu.

Just a kid with something pointed and shiny.

"Shit," Angel mumbled. "Oh, shit."

He slid along the worn seat until he could lean sideways against the shingled building, and he buried his face in his trembling hands, feeling relief in the absolute darkness that

he cupped in his palms. The hot humid air that August trapped in the town burned through his chills. After a long moment, he slumped forward, elbows on his jeans, and eased his bony fingers through his long snow-white hair, then rubbed the scarred left temple and eyebrow where he'd taken shrapnel fragments. Here was the legacy that transformed his life from bright to dark.

"You? Boy?"

Angel looked up into a placid face framed by a Smoky-the-Bear hat and the collar of a stiff blue uniform. A ruddy nose supported mirrorshades with holographed American flags wavering on the lens surfaces, and the scent of hair tonic seemed to cloud about the man like the atmosphere about a dying world. His aura looked healthy in hue, yet greasy and iridescent.

Angel shrugged. He didn't recognize the man. A rent-a-pig hauled in for the season.

"I'm talkin' to you."

The hair on Angel's neck tingled. He felt the old anger rise within him, the killing rage he'd fought all day to control. He stood and stretched his thin body like a buzzard airing its wings, his chin almost touching the man's pasty forehead.

"So talk."

"I've gotta complaint from an upstandin' citizen." The man stepped back, his aura flecked with oily spots. "Says yer a suspicious lookin' character. I'm gonna run a check."

"Check on what, asshole? I'm just as 'upstanding.' I was born here. I pay taxes here. I earned the fuckin' right to be here! Earned it!" He tugged at the stripes and patches on his coat that emblazoned a history of his Army service. "Where the fuck were you when my ass was on the line? You're a goddamn virgin. Fresh around the point with a tinfoil badge and a side arm you've never fired. Get back to the field, man. A couple wharf rats are passing a brown bag. Miss Muffin's crapping little Tu Tu at the curb. Another tourista's dumped a moped on Main Street. Your fight's still on."

"What?" The man's jaw dropped. "Who d'ya think you are?"

"Officer, he's Angel O'Day," one of the bartenders said from the restaurant doorway. "He's got photographs in the Main Street Gallery. And he's been president of the local artist's group. People look up to him."

The cop scanned nervously around at the small crowd that gathered about them. His aura pulsed in a regular beat that shifted from sulphur yellow to anthracite blue. A woman took over and continued the lecture.

"You shouldn't go bothering him like this. He's got a Medal of Honor fighting in the war." She turned back to the bartender. "I don't know where they hire these dimwits. Our kids are getting raped by the off-islanders, buying drugs from them, and we get cops that hassle us while sitting on the town benches."

"Listen, lady."

"Don't lady me!" She left the doorway of the restaurant and stood next to them at the curb. "We get that lady-lady-do-this crap from every day tripper and every jerk from the yacht moorings. You listen, and listen straight. You get out and earn your keep. Or we'll ship you and your kind back where you came from."

A girl hollered, "That's telling him." The bartender moved away as a customer called to him from the bar inside. The woman followed.

The cop stood a long moment in silence, staring at Angel as if the pose he struck exuded a form of menace, a distilled conjuration that might cast a sudden bolt of fear through Angel's heart. His aura held to a deep, lightless blue. Angel pointed at his stripes again, as if to say, "I earned mine." The cop turned and left with a grunt.

Angel sat again, wondering how many entries a computer check could have on him. They might unearth his war record as a medic and then a weapons expert, but that *was* Medal of Honor stuff. They might find out that he'd rode vigilante for a private organization of veterans just after Central America, helping those that were in trouble, or more often—as circumstances would have it—helping to diffuse a crisis a vet had caused. But they'd never know that the vets had called him

'the angel of death,' or that trouble had followed him like hellhounds on the trail. No, no police profile could see into the real temper of his alloy, or into what churned deep in the acid pools of his gut.

"You okay, honey? That officer was rude."

For a moment the girl who tapped his arm was a buttery swatch of light, then her chocolate brown hair and soft brown eyes and pink pantsuit swam into focus. Not another one, he thought. First the misfired exchange with the mother, then the cop, now Miss Daphne Do-Good from the Society of Southern Belles and Repressed Nymphs. Doing her vacation sabbatical between mornings at the deli, and nights grinding herself against another frat-boy icon of the American Dream.

"You a nurse? Did someone at the bar call for you?"

"No."

He looked her up and down. "So what got to you? The speeches to the cop? My sad eyes?"

Traffic from the boat was still trickling along the street. Hugie Lewis prowled by in his white Cadillac minibus with a delta fin on the trunk extension.

"Don't need to be a doctor to see you've been straining those eyes," she said. "From the way you rub them, it could be serious."

"Yeah. Well I know how wor-ried your crowd gets. And I've seen serious from the summer people. Ser-ee-fucking-us."

"You bastard! I don't know why I bothered."

As she walked away, Angel rubbed at his left temple again. He knew why she bothered: guilt, plain and simple guilt. She felt bad that she'd grown up with every advantage in the world, and even if stopping to talk made her uncomfortable, it felt like the right thing to her. For women like her, things had to feel right. They had to be resolved. Well, they weren't goddamn going to get resolved with his help, even if he had good reason to give a girl like this the benefit of the doubt. No amount of kind gestures were going to bring his eyesight back, and pity wasn't his poison of choice. Vodka, right? Still,

he *was* as paranoid as those first years back home in the States, but he'd been working very hard to overcome the anger and psychoses that ate at him. He'd worked harder than anyone had been capable of seeing, but he didn't want to dwell on that any longer.

Angel pushed himself up and continued back along the brick sidewalk, crossed the street, and passed the library park and then around the post office to a street corner bustling with cruise tourists. They were decked out in heavy cameras that stooped their shoulders and marked them with winced expressions. Several stood at the doorway of The Hub, the news center where Nantucket gossip mixed with international headlines, and the billboard displayed anything from concert posters to lost dog notices to pleas from homeless preppies. Angel ignored them. He breathed deeply of the moist air, and he strained to look down past the illuminated clothes stores and parked taxis to the harbor. An abstract wash of blue beneath deep blue was all he could make out. He sighed, shoved his hands in the pockets of his pants, and crossing the cobblestones, he threaded his way up the brick sidewalk past the cars that lined the curb, the leisure strollers and the families lapping Ben & Jerry's cones as they stared at a window display of local authors in Mitchell's Books. He began to fantasize that they were all marauders in disguise, sent to the island to loot and plunder its native riches, while giving back paper tender and worthless impressions from their credit cards—those plastic identity tags stamped with their individual number of the beast. The screech of tires startled him.

A blue station wagon had stuck a pedestrian crossing the granite walk that angled toward him from the twin pharmacies across the street, and a crowd gathered like iron filings drawn to the pole of a magnet. Angel leaned against a big elm by the bookstore, its gnarled roots seeming to reach deep into the earth below the bricks, as if supporting the tableau, and he watched Hugie Lewis step from his tour bus where it was parked at the curb and order people to give the victim room. Angel wondered where he'd developed his sense of

action and authority. Beating his wife, no doubt. Or his kids. As Angel stepped closer onto the cobbles to watch Hugie at work, balancing on his toes, he saw that the pedestrian was the girl who'd stopped to talk with him, the society belle in the pantsuit. Hugie kneeled before her, poking her ribs, her stomach, her skull as she moaned. These probes might have appeared to a layman to be made out of concern for her health, but to Angel they were indelicate, not medical in tone. Then as Hugie laid a big hand on her forehead, the girl cried out, her arms and feet twitching until one great shudder wracked her body and her clouded aura shrunk to a dark raisin, then winked out. She lay still. Blood trickled along the corner of her mouth.

Angel felt nausea deep in his gut. It shot tendrils of heat into his arms and neck, and he rested his back against the tree. He wanted to get home and discuss his eye problems with his housemate Jimmy. Before sitting under the spotlight in the back yard and polishing the Triumph that he'd never ride again, or climbing the narrow attic stairs to the dark room to work on the enlargements for his gallery show in September. He wanted to get away from downtown as soon as possible, but instead sat down. Another flashback gripped him.

The light from a flyspecked window in the back of the barn, and her foot aglow where it angles across the end of the stained mattress. Details made hyper-real. Inescapable details. Grime caught in the cracks of her toes. A sisal rope tied both above and below her ankle bone, biting into the flesh, chaffing the white to red. Bruises on her calf where his hands have grabbed her. *His* hands. She pulls her leg back into the shadows as if the light is an acid cutting into the raw wounds. A hornet falls from the rafters above and lands where her ankle has been. The bug rights itself and crawls off the edge, then climbs back into view over the seam at the mattress corner. It is jet with a metallic blue tinge to its wings, and it flutters those wings every few seconds, as if possessed by a nervous twitch. Like the twitch in his hands. *His* hands.

She looks away, then rests her head against a stud protruding from the wall. If only she could forget.

If only she hadn't listened to Muffy convincing their friends that Nantucket was great for jobs, about how easy it was to waitress, how great it would be to stay roomies through the summer. How much she could bankroll by Labor Day! If only she hadn't made it a secret. Kept it from Mom. From all the kids back home. From everyone, period. It was supposed to be such a slick surprise. She'd arrived on the noon boat; decided to take a tour, just to waste time before the restaurant opened and she could surprise Muffy and the gang, then call home with her plans. She'd picked a classy bus, one nearly empty. Gone on a trip out into the moors. Got out and walked around. Told the driver to pick her up on his next swing by. And never got back.

God, *never* sounds so ugly. So final. She pushes it from her mind along with the pain.

But the pain wells there inside her, somewhere under the soft and dreamy layers of coke. The pain of all those other inescapable details. The lesions at the corners of her mouth. The swollen side of her face. The half-closed eye. The ache that runs from her belly down into her thighs. The burns and bruises. The... The sunlight winks out on the mattress, and she looks up. A shadow blocks the window: rugged, head like an ox, wide shoulders. It moves beside her, kneels. What has it been? Two, three brutal visits? Twenty-four hours since he dragged her here, pulled down a mattress stored above, realized what a great prison he had and tied her in; and now he's brought a spectator. A wraith-like creature in white, a white that glows wherever it glides. There's a click and whirl to its movements. The wink of a large eye. For a moment she stares into the wrinkled face of an elderly lady. Could be her grandmother, for christ's sake. Then the woman puts the whirring device to her shoulder and backs away. As the eye watches, her torturer moves in.

But she's ready this time. She gauges how far the ropes allow her to reach away from the wall. It's the Adam's apple she wants. Just below his voice. When she hears him speak

close to her, she lashes out hard. Drives straight with a tight fist.

He catches it and laughs. Twists her arm behind her until her shoulder gives out and her cheek is pressed flat against the mattress. She won't struggle; he likes that best. Really likes it. He strikes a match with his other hand. Lights a candle. Lights a cigarette, then grinds the match out on the point of her wing bone. Pulls something into view. A pipe. A bit of tin foil. A small, cloudy lumpy of crack. A new match. He puts the pipe to her lips, forces her to breathe in the smoke. The hit rises to the top of her skull and vaults through it. Gassing her good. Juicing her with shivers along her spine. This will help her forget. Help it go away.

He keeps the pressure on her arm, though, and reaches under her stomach, and claws her, pulls up until her buttocks arch. He pinches her hard in the soft depths there. Greases her skin with spittle. Slow. Methodical. Almost sensual. Until his thumb probes her tailbone and crushes the tip with a jolt that arches her further. Then his other hand encloses her neck. Like last time. The one that cut the blood supply for a long moment. Reducing the oxygen, like last time, and causing her to struggle wildly when he burned her with his cigarette across the back. She doesn't care now; she's lost touch with caring. She wants to feel something. Feel anything real. Even him inside her. That would show purpose, show some sort of motivation. That might be construed as affection, as comprehensible. It might help her forget this senseless torture. Help it go away, go away, go away. But though he probes her roughly with his thumb and forefinger, he's not interested in sex. All she feels are the hands at her throat. His one hand that twitches. Joined by a frail white one.

And this time, as the eye records everything, this time they *never* leave.

Angel staggered to his feet and shook his head to clear out the images. Sleep, hopefully a dreamless one, called to him. He started home with an void in his heart and the taste of stomach acid in his throat.

"O'Day. Stop a minute."

The voice sounded muted and hoarse, a man's calling from within a vehicle. Angel hunched his shoulders and didn't look back until he reached the big whitewashed church with golden letters on the town clock that caught fire as the floodlamps pumped their energy into a halo about it. The bus paralleled him up the hill, with the driver's big arm draped out the window. He couldn't make out the name on the side, but he knew who it belonged to.

Mr. Lewis was on the stakeout again. He'd felt death, rooted himself in it like a plant feeding from the land, and he was unphased and ready for further action. Little girl, he's *some* kind of man. Little girl, he's got some ride for you! Won't cost ya nothin', not at first. Jesus! What did Hugie want with him, anyway?

"Hey you. O'Day?"

Angel stepped onto a brick ramp that led to the basement level of the church, but instead of entering the door, which opened into a vestibule busy with ticketholders for a folk sing he'd seen advertised, Angel slipped down a dark walkway to the back of the church. The alley opened into the yard of the rectory that bordered another street, and he slipped through a hedge of stiff leaves. He felt relieved, as if he'd passed through the magic wardrobe into Narnia, though he was in no less of a foul mood.

The sidewalks that led home were all narrow, either brick or old cobbles paved over in tarmac. White picket fences laced with roses or edged with lilies ran before many plain houses, terminating at their stairs, and the front stoops were accessible from either side. Taller estates stood beyond the street lights with chalk-colored trim and long walkways to columned doors ornamented with brass handles or name plates. The gray of their weathered cedar shingles looked like great fields of Lilith's Tarot cards with their backs turned down in orderly rows, and Angel guessed at the secret readings they might give about their owners: you shall live out your retirement in a valium bottle; you shall buy a Rolls and a congressman; your children are doomed to love only your

nannies and hate the antiques; your wife knows of every affair; the neighbor watches you with binoculars. And for the occasional clapboard mansion with four chimneys and a grandly immaculate lawn: hell is wanting everyone to know you live here. As he passed out of the heartland of affluence and into the lesser streets and cobbled alleys, the houses shrank to moderate investments with side yards no wider than a swizzle stick, some unkempt for want of a gardener, others for want of a Kennedy or a Dukakis. Angel became lulled by the pace of his walk and the sameness of the landscape, until he found himself at a street corner blocked by Hugie's white tour bus. The big man leaned out his window. Waving a palsied finger.

All she feels...

"Okay, now we talk."

"Fuck you." Angel stepped off the curb to go around the van.

Hugie pulled forward, then stopped and swung open his door. Someone did the same on the other side.

Angel turned as if to run, then spun back with the kick of his boot, nailing the door against Hugie. It creased him up the middle with a thud.

"Shit!" he heard Hugie growl.

Angel sprinted up a side street, and when he heard the engine fire up, he leaped a fence and doubled back through the sideyard of a big saltbox. Hugie disappeared up the street he'd run along. Angel stepped from the shadows, crossed the street corner he first negotiated, then jogged until he reached the door of Lilith's boarding house.

The varnish on her front door had long since bubbled in the sun and run like taffy. Two cracked panels of cranberry glass, cut in floral sprays, replaced the upper panels in its traditional upended-cross design, and they tinted the hall lights within into a pinkish cast on the front step. She'd let the trim paint around it and on the corner boards peel away like a sunburn, left the old shingles on until fine green mosses coated them beneath the windowsills. The building stood as a monument to individuality, a blockade against the real

estate mentality that made this present generation of island landholders rich but left their heirs with no land to build a life of their own. Angel felt a strong affinity with it, and a growing one with Lilith and the others that shared it with him. It felt good to be home.

As he reached for the knob, the door jerked open on its own. By instinct he sat back on his heels, prepared to kick. But it was only Jimmy Beal, a dwarfish man, four and a half feet tall with the dusky gray-brown skin of an Aborigine and sunbleached hair on his chest that looked like dark copper above the neck of his tee shirt. His aura glistened with the same vibrance. The tee said "Indian Summer" down the long sleeves, and it advertised an imaginary movie: *Eric Von Zipper Meets Da Cat In: Surf Wars*.

"Hey. What's got you jazzed. I was just talking with Lil about you. Come on in back. She's doing a session."

"Jimmy! I told you to watch out about startling people."

"It's okay. Lil says it's just my karma. My psych path, you know."

Jimmy's smile could have powered the town's air-conditioning glut.

"Yeah, I know." Things like this happened all too often to Angel around the house. If witches existed in the world, or enchantments resided in a dwelling, grounded in a place, then they were here. And he'd seen magic in the Yucatan during the war, felt its closeness in the Indian ruins. This wasn't just his active imagination.

Angel set the camera bag by his mail on the hall table—a Bookworks card and a bill on his motorcycle insurance from the Brock Company—then followed Jimmy into the dim passages at the back of the house, where plants grew from every corner and level surface, fine antiques cohabitated with crude art, and a pride of tabby cats prowled the bare rugs like predators in a miniature land of the lost. They entered the kitchen, a square room landscaped in postcards from old boarders and tiled in terra cotta. A huge woodcut by a premier Nantucket artist, one showing nine views of the Old Mill, dominated one wall. Lilith sat upright in a high-

backed chair in the windowed half of the kitchen, her straight black hair cropped to a mannish cut, as if she'd prematurely foregone her sexuality at forty to concentrate on more lofty ideals. Her attitudes were far from asensual, however. Her features shone with the alabaster hue of Greek statuettes. She wore tight khaki shorts and a loose flowery shirt that accented the fullness of her breasts and matched the greens of her eyes. She sat before a small claw-foot table, arranging amethyst and quartz crystals on a piece of brown cloth woven from alpaca wool. Her hands moved with fluid grace.

"Busy downtown tonight?" she asked.

"Yeah, busy as bug shit. I decided it was better to work in the dark room upstairs."

She leaned forward, uncrossing her sinuous legs.

"Sounds like you ran into trouble."

"Yeah. The same old thing. Hostile moms and cops with cement chips between their shoulders. Fatal accidents. That and a boat load of fresh victims for the dark gods that rule Nantucket."

"Oh?" She gave him a penetrating look, a probing shot that hit deeper than had the mother on the boat. This woman had an effect on him, no shit. When he'd first moved in, he'd tried to ignore her, but in a kingdom of cats and cactii her bewitched looks caught him in absolute, hormonal terms. He'd thought of her when he tossed and turned in a restless attempt at making it through the night, and the image of her naked body, twisted in the sheets of her bed one floor below, would make things worse. It fostered a yearning that he carried into a shallow slumber peopled with dancing houris, all with her stone green eyes. He would awake with an erection straining against his briefs. Then an important phone call necessitated that she shake him awake one night, and he'd looked up to find her draped in a bolt of moonlight, staring into his tented sheets. Her smile had hit him like a heat wave, and after the call, she'd returned with him to his room and raised the temperature several notches. Her present look was just as powerful, charged with the electricity that lately flowed free between them. She was as attracted to

him as he was to her, and only his recent problems and her mystique as a landlady kept them from being a steady thing. Or as she'd say, they were both Tauruses—Born To Be Stubborn.

"So. What do you mean by dark gods?"

"You know. You don't leave the house much, but you can see their signs. The lords of avarice and social disease."

She laughed briefly, and Angel turned to Jimmy. Jimmy had slipped away without a sound.

"Pull up a seat, Angel. We haven't talked in awhile. Tell me about your trip?"

"Hunh?" He hadn't told anyone about it, not even her. Even as lovers they didn't watch over each others comings and goings.

"You went off island this morning, didn't you? I just saw it in the crystals."

Angel shrugged. "You saw it in my bleary face, maybe. More likely Jimmy saw me at the dock."

She tossed her head a bit. Her moist lips caught a reflection from the stained glass lamp that hung overhead, and she looked like a figure in an avant-garde fashion ad. She moved a Tarot deck onto the closest windowsill and switched on a small tensor lamp, which added a compressed actinic light that caught the edges of the minerals and sent colored spectra streaking about the kitchen.

"You're still a skeptic about my work. Same as your wiseass attitude about the island and what's happening to it."

"It's going to hell. You aren't."

"That's not skepticism. That's fact. Only you regularly dowse it in dyspepsia." She caught a flaw in the arrangement of her smaller crystals and adjusted them like a nimble-fingered piano player stretching for a difficult chord on the keyboard. Several beams flashed directly in his eyes. "Tell me," she said. "If there were dark gods here, what would they look like?"

"Real estate agents with forked tongues."

She said, "Do any of them have straight ones?"

"Nah. I suspect there's a crook in every one of their body

parts."

Lilith laughed harder. "Except those shriveled from dis-use."

"Yeah, I guess they're too ordinary for gods."

Angel pulled up a stool before her narrow table and relaxed in a squat on the high seat, one foot up on the side rung. He picked at the edge of her cloth, drawing a few strands of alpaca fur from the corner. He enjoyed this kind of talk with her, coy and playful, though as always she searched out his opinions like a newspaper reporter.

"Too ordinary?"

He said, "They're minor demons at best. No, the local Moloch would more resemble Hugie Lewis."

One of Lilith's hands jumped, knocking several points of quartz out of alignment. She covered her surprise with a puzzled frown.

"Hugie, you say?"

"Yeah. Hugie as a kind of a reverse Persephone myth. In spring he takes the daughters of earth into his Detroit chariot, plies them with wine and controlled substances at his lair in the Hidden Forest. This prolongs the Season of the Tourist, you see. Only when the girls are set free can Jack Frost descend upon the moors and beaches again, hastening the Season of the Scallop."

"You are convincing. More than you realize!"

It was Angel's turn to raise eyebrows.

"Explain, lady."

Lilith reached across the narrow table and stopped his fidgeting with a firm pat on his wrist.

"But *you* aren't through yet. I want to know if you've looked at Hugie Lewis lately. What did you see?"

"The motherfucker was hassling me tonight. Following me!"

Angel began to feel nauseous. His vision blurred. The unnerving shift of scintillae that beamed from the jewels mingled with a disturbing memory of the big bus driver. The dark, featureless aura of the man had tried to swallow Angel. Angel hadn't really blacked out. No, Hugie was something

different. Something worthy of belly tumors and bad teeth and fallen sainthood. He recalled Hugie as he hovered over the accident victim on Main Street. *His hand that twitches.*

"Go ahead. What happened?"

"I saw a man whose appetite for perversion looked endless. I saw an aura of evil."

Again she covered his hand with hers, but this time she stroked it, sending a prickly heat up his arm. This calmed his queasy insides, and replaced them with sudden warmth and good feeling. He felt his glands respond, felt the sensation travel to his chest, then his groin. Her aura, which previously showed as a faint lace, now carried the warm golden translucence of wine, and the glittering beams from the crystals that had bothered his eyes now spun into the depths of the color like dim swirling nebulae. He sensed the unclouded depths within her soul and the power that she exerted with it. He twisted his hand over hers and gave it a hard squeeze.

"You're not well. You shouldn't work tonight," she said. Lilith leaned toward him and rested her forehead on his, stretching to brush her lips across his mouth.

"Yeah. I'd be seeing shit glowing in the photos too."

"You've seen auras, then?"

"Yeah. I've seen plenty." He hesitated, unsure if he could respond to her, if he could make love after such a bad day. "But none have been as beautiful as yours."

"Ah. Dear Angel."

He sensed a spiritual bond in the crackling blend of their auras as they kissed again.

"I've missed you lately," she said.

She stood and eased around the table, hugging his head to her firm stomach. He felt peaceful, as if a wound closed in his soul, and he nuzzled her through the cloth of her shirt, pushing his nose up into the cleft of her breasts. She led him down the dark hall to her bedroom, shooed away cats to kick open the door, and pulled him into her arms as she swung it shut from within. He picked her off her feet in the embrace, slipped his hands under the waist of her shorts and cupped her buttocks in his palms, stroking them, building a static

charge of passion that animated her tongue, punctuated her kisses with small bites on his lower lip and on his neck. Her hair felt cool on his face; he smelled the clean aroma of cooking herbs mingled with soap. As she wiggled out of her shorts, he swung her up so that she clamped her legs about his hips. He stripped off their shirts and worked out of his pants; then he carried her to the bed, and into a rhythm of soft cries and hard breaths.

Through the tall windows by the bed, the moon struck a spiky, hundred-pound conglomerate of crystals on the dresser and bathed them in pale foxfire, a protection against the nameless beasts that ran with the night, against the leering phantoms of Hugie and the police and the dead girl in pink and the sad kid with leukemia and the woman in the barn and the apparitions that had visited her—all that Angel imagined to be lurking just beyond the glass. The light intensified until it burnished their flesh brighter than alabaster, and it lifted them higher above the moment, above all worries, caught in a timeless convulsion of purified heat and motion.

3

Dawn in Lilith's kitchen passed through a myriad of colored bottles that lined the windows, and their pastels were streaked across his white skin and underwear like small enchantments, like weak simulations of the fierce light that had bathed him in her arms during the night. Angel opened the refrigerator and returned a bottle of cold apple juice to the top shelf, then let the door swing shut until the magnetic seal caught the metal with a distinct sound of closure, a minor heralding, perhaps, that he was leaving behind old habits, his old tendencies as a loner. He was making reformations, forming new relationships. He wanted the little failures of the last year to be wiped clean in a single stroke: the parting of ways with friends in Appalachia, his inability to meet his gallery commitments, the headaches and vision troubles. Getting away for the weekend on the Cape had seemed a solution so perfect that for a moment on the trip last night, as his heart strained against his rib cage like a leashed dog, he'd hoped against hope that what the eye doctor there had said was wrong. He'd imagined that his routine on island was so removed from reality that he could live and heal by different rules. Reality set in, though, the feeling passed, and the boat docked. But then Lilith had rubbed her healing affection upon him, and he was revitalized in spirit. He wasn't about to accept the doom-saying that narrowed his photojournalist's career to six more months. He seemed to be suspended between his 35mm quest for the true underbelly of the island's society and his exploration of the private roots

that still linked him to its year-round residents. He'd have to make the best of it, learn a new part of the trade, a new angle for chronicling Nantucket.

Sestina, a tri-colored cat with a mean temper, meowed from beside the sink. He ignored her as he rifled the vitamin shelf above until he'd downed his glass of juice with megadoses of C, and E, and choline. The angle of the sun caught a bottle made of cranberry glass with its beams and stained him in a blush of dark crimson. It reminded him somehow of the color of last night's events, of the accident on Main Street.

"Hey, man," someone said with a whisper. It was Jimmy, standing in the doorway with two grocery bags and a new surfing tee cut short above the belt line of his faded jeans: *Hell Planet: Trapped On A World Of Beer Distilleries And 30 Foot Swells*.

"Yeah." Angel's voice sounded loud in the room. "What're you up for? Trying to scare me again?"

"No way, Jose. I'm doing errands for Lil. You want to come?"

He thought of Lilith, how she lay in the bed: her mussed black hair, her hands tucked under a smooth cheek, her expression dreamy and soft.

"I doubt it."

"Come on, Leon. She said you'd be up early enough to help. She read it in the cards and crystals just before you came home."

"Oh?" That gave Angel something to ponder. Just how much of last night did she sense ahead of time? Headlines from cheap tabloids played through his head in the spirit of Jimmy's shirts. Angel Comes to ESPer! Landlady Lands Dream Lover! Clairvoyant Sees Triple Climax in Vision! He found it disconcerting, but not in a way that made him paranoid. The thought touched him in a sweet place, a place that hadn't been sweet until now. He felt a closer bond with Jimmy as well. Here was a street-wise Jersey black kid who'd learned decent English and foregone the downbound fate of a junkie for the uptime life of a beach bum.

"So, what do you say? Is it a plan, Stan?"

"Sure. Let me pull some pants on."

While Jimmy exited through the front door to where his jeep was parked across the street, Angel turned down the side passage to Lilith's room and paused at her door. He debated whether he should disturb her or climb to his room to get dressed. If she'd guessed that he would be up early, it didn't matter, and he didn't have to feel guilty about leaving. He pushed the door open and gathered his clothes onto a wicker chair. As he buttoned his green flannel shirt, he watched her face in the grainy light that broke through the morning fog and flooded the room from the east, and when he bent and kissed her forehead, she moved in the bed, arching her head slightly like a baby bird so sated—it seemed—that it searched for food by instinct rather than need. He kissed her on the lips, closed the door behind him.

Outside, Jimmy had folded down the canvas top of his jeep. He eased the fins of his surfboard back against the tailgate and strapped the nose to one side of his roll bar, leaving room in the back for a pair of sawhorses and a sign, professionally lettered with a pointing hand that said "Detour." Jimmy swung himself into the driver's seat and started the engine as Angel sunk in next to a big CB radio that lay loose on a tape box between them.

"Where to?"

He revved the engine, and spun in and out of several one way streets, then onto a wider one called Orange. He gripped the wheel until his brown knuckles stretched taut.

"Come on. Where to?"

"Bake shop," Jimmy said with a grin. Instead of stopping for pastries, though, he reached back into the grocery bag as they passed the shop and flipped a sachet of smelly herbs into the heart of a big rose bush. He continued on, driven more by internal tension than by the jocularly he displayed on the surface. Angel peeked into the bag. Other sachets and small bundles of cloth were mixed with odd objects like trowels and balls of twine. They stopped at a corner further from town, and Jimmy hung a small twist of brown velvet on the concealed side of a telephone pole. After several

similar stops and paper-boy fastball deliveries, plus pickups of old packets, they returned to within a few blocks of Pine Street and parked by an old windmill shingled in weathered cedar shakes. The historic building sat high on an ancient glacial moraine that overlooked the harbor and the roof tops bunched close about the center of town. Scotch broom scented the air with pollen and speckled the hedge around the hexagonal mill with yellow blossoms. Jimmy stood with a measuring tape and a compass at the center of the clearing, beside a used grinding stone set in the ground before the door.

Jimmy explained. "We face due south and measure thirty feet from the center of the stone. Then three feet due west. Bingo!"

At the measured mark, Jimmy knelt and troweled the dirt, careful to preserve the plug of grass at the surface. He buried something wrapped in blue velvet and patted the grass into place.

"Christ, why are we doing this?" Angel asked. "Every time I ride with you it's like a secret initiation into Pee Wee's madhouse for boys. I feel silly doing this shit."

Jimmy laughed. "So did I, until Lil explained it." He led Angel back to the jeep, looking about to see if they'd been observed. The lingering fog about the hilltop made him very nervous.

"Don't start in, Jimmy. I've heard the rap. We're like terrorists in a private struggle, right? And these are crystals in various wraps. Bugs for eavesdropping. She listens through them, and they attune her to what's grooving out here with the summer crowd. You buy that?"

"Sometimes they ward off trouble."

"Sure. Right! I know how real magic is created. It's not done with crystals or jewels or stones. It's a power. Something foreboding."

Jimmy shrugged as they slid into their seats, and he started the jeep onto the pavement, then cut into his lane with a squeal of tires. He flicked on the CB and barely missed a deep pothole that seemed camouflaged in ground mist until the

last moment. A second, invisible one jolted Angel forward on the seat, almost into the windshield.

"So you don't believe in her."

Angel frowned. "Lilith, yes. But what can minerals do? I mean there's people dying out there..."

"Well, it's indirect mostly. I suppose these sorts of happenings are just a chain of events. And if we help break the chain, then the trouble is broken as well."

"Sure. Buryin' crystals will stop the violence."

Jimmy twisted up his mouth, as if he were about to reveal a secret he'd promised not to tell.

"Lil never says how it works. She says she's just a hidden force for good."

"I wish I could accept that. The summer crowd comes in and expects the world. And everyone bends over and gives it to them. They create their own rules. We need a stronger counterforce."

He listened to the police calls with a sense of urgency as Jimmy drove to a small traffic circle with a flagpole in the middle, then turned left beside a rolling field dotted with a handful of tilted gravestones that cast long jagged shadows in the sunlight that burned through the fog. Angel slipped his sunglasses from his pocket and onto his nose. The flaking blue and white sign said Madaket Road, and as Jimmy drove toward Madaket and let the engine unwind, no longer hampered by the starts and stops of in-town driving, the landscape spread out before them in a rumpled quilt of russets and greens patterned with wildflowers. A pair of horse barns fronted long thin fields of cropped grass and yellow-topped Devil's hawkweed. Daisies and Queen Anne's lace swayed in the unkempt stretches between one-story cottages and saltboxes with central chimneys. Where the dirt was thin over the sandy subsoil, or less fertile, the open moors were dominated by low clusters of bayberry and wild roses and purple-red thistles and scrub oak and sinister, spiky hawthorns in twisted poses. Jimmy cut the curves and sped along a straight-away that approached a small pond with a cylindrical black water tower squatting like a

warlord's castle on the hill beyond. They downshifted up a steep hill bordered by scrubby Japanese pines and a bicycle path, and at the crest of the hill, Jimmy turned sharply and came to a stop in a parking lot enclosed by a rail fence and yellowed, dying pines. Jimmy switched off the static on the CB.

"Nothing going down on the radio. Let's hope it stays that way."

Jimmy and Angel walked out on the grassy moors where an old farm house once stood, its own water tower of pale ocher tile now crumbled into ugly rubble on the marshy lowlands. Jimmy looked worried, and he stopped several times to look back along the overgrown road. They followed a rut through a bit of forest and into a second open field paralleling water, then on through mosquito-filled brushlands crossed by deer trails until they climbed to a third, high pasture that looked down upon the full ribbon of the pond and a distant beachfront to the south that glittered in the morning sun. Clouds shrouded Ram's Pasture, and a gray-shingled barn crouched at the center of the field, crowned with a cupola whose windows were busted out into toothy rows. An unstrung telephone pole stood to the side, where a second, commonly used road approached from a parking lot at the bottom of the hill.

"We're supposed to bury a big crystal here. Near the double doors."

The light from a flyspecked window in the back of the barn...

"And we couldn't park down there, I suppose. Not part of the Lost Boys' ritual." Angel said this as he pointed toward the nearby lot. "Right?"

"Right."

The growl of an engine sounded from below, and they watched a white bus nose through the rushes and mud flats on the road. Jimmy pulled Angel into a crouch.

"Somebody's unlocked the gate and come through. Into the bushes. Hurry!"

Jimmy started for the closest stand of beach plum and low bayberry, but Angel urged him further on, making for a big

oak that stretched over the barbed wire enclosing the area nearest the barn. They slipped through the wire and lay behind the tree's raised roots as the vehicle hit a rut and bounced into sight at a fast clip. It stopped near the barn doors. Angel was not surprised to read "Lewis Tours and Charters" painted on the side.

"Hugie." Jimmy whispered it with a growl in the base of his throat. "It's Hugie Lewis."

The light from a flyspecked window...

"And Dora Guildpole. What's she doing with him?"

Hugie pushed himself up from the driver's seat and stood with the aid of an ebony cane with a stone head. Actually it resembled a thin club, studded with sharp points in rows down its shaft. A white-haired woman dressed all in white and a wiry man with a blue suit coat and rimless glasses opened the padlock on the doors and disappeared inside. They reappeared just as Hugie popped open the trunk, and they carried something in black plastic, a long bale that slumped between them. There was something ominous in this scene, a sense of *deja vu*. The skin on his arms raised in goose bumps, and Angel no longer took their day's adventure lightly. He might have stood, having felt the impulse to confront them, but Hugie looked up and scanned the brush in their direction. Hugie spoke, and Angel strained to hear him.

"I got a bad feelin' someone's here. Or been here."

"Then we'd pick up signs of them for sure," said the woman, her muddy aura writhing and pulsing. She pushed at the bag until the trunk closed tight. "No goddamn stone can block out signs like that. And I get nothing. No reading."

"What if it's her!" the other man said in alarm.

Hugie spat. "You know she can't leave that house. Nah, it's that little dwarf of hers. Only there's a new influence, some device blockin' the signs. Caught a notion of it last week. And again last night."

"So let's find it."

"Nah. Ain't got time. We got merchandise to move." He arched his back, threw out his belly. "You can't fight us," he

yelled, threatening the world.

Hugie grunted as he squirmed back into the bus, and the others followed. They backed up and tore forward, hitting the rut again and exiting on the fly. Jimmy responded in kind.

"I want to follow them," he yelled as he slid under the wire fencing with Angel.

Angel ran after Jimmy, losing ground as they passed into the middle field and back toward the site of the old farm. Angel felt in fine shape, but Jimmy was a condensed knot of muscle, his dark legs pounding out a pace that had won him one of the local Iron Man endurance races. Also, the bushes and branches caught in Angel's clothes. He slipped when a fallen branch seemed to writhe and move like a snake, but when he gained his balance, it appeared normal. After a six-or-so-minute mile, Angel collapsed in the passenger's seat. Jimmy floored it out of the parking lot and up a short twist of pavement to where the Madaket Road branched off to beaches along the north shore on Nantucket Sound and back toward town. He jammed the brakes and jumped out, pulling one of the sawhorses out of the back.

"Come on. Help."

Angel groaned. He didn't want to move another muscle. "You buying us time?" he asked as he stood up the other one and rested the sign against it, pointing the hand along a road that led back by a different route to the Cliff area—another glacial moraine—that overlooked the town and harbor.

"No, narrowing our choices. We're going to follow them."

"What if they head further out, toward Madaket. Or take the Dionis turn."

"No. They've taken a rutted access to the main road, then they'll head to town this way. We're forcing them to take the Cliff Road for sure."

They piled in the jeep, burning rubber as they careened down an incline and sped toward the hill where the black water tower imposed its monolithic presence on the cliff. Jimmy pulled beyond a narrow drive hidden in tall brush and backed in. They waited, catching their breath at last. The day felt hot now. Drops of sweat glistened in the tight choc-

olate curls of Jimmy's hair.

"You know what's in the bag, don't you?" Angel asked.

Jimmy nodded. "Coke."

Angel thought about it a moment, rerunning the events he'd just witnessed like a short strip of film in his head. Coke! That might explain several things. But he had an instinct that their was a death involved, and that instinct grew powerful, numbing his tired body with a feeling of dread, flipping over into a full blown montage of images. His head began to throb. The black spots welled before his eyes and fused into darkness.

This time he's observing from above. A watcher.

Naturally, a woman lies tied up at the bottom of a shallow sandpit. Smoke rises beyond the edges, isolating her, severing her ties with the familiar world. Her neck is swollen, the glands puffed up, and her lips are swollen and cracked as well. Worse yet, if anything can be worse, she has markings cut into her arms and legs, markings not resembling Celtic symbols or signs of witchcraft as much as they resemble those peculiar runes carved into the rocks of South Sea Islands. The dirt stings in these welts. The dirt works into all her sores and cuts. The dirt fills her mouth.

Four figures are barely discernible at the edge of the pit: featureless lumps, darkness incarnate. Their outlines merge into a silhouette with eight legs and eight arms. They lift a small figure down into the pit, a grade-school girl whose eyes are glazed over from drugs and whose hands are taped around the haft of an electric carving knife rigged with a long sliver of obsidian. The girl fingers the button, her expression filling with wonder and delight at the power surging through her arms. The woman sits up, trying to spin away; but the girl hops forward, plants her foot on the woman's long hair to hold her in place, and begins to carve at her side and her exposed arm. The blood runs slick along the knife and coats the girl's forearms.

Still viewing this from above, Angel shudders in the grip of his vision, wanting to break away, yet entranced by the

lucid terror it invokes.

The woman tries to scream, but she is barely audible through the crud filling her mouth. The child pulls the woman by her hair and onto her back, then slashes the obsidian knife down, and up. A crude V, then rips across the top. The girl stands at the pit's edge, holding up the woman's heart in an offering and passing up the bloody obsidian point to the people above, and they toss down a body bag for the remains. Hugie tosses it down. When it's over, and most of the scene fades from Angel, the image of Hugie lingers on. This is the man whose shadowy presence moves through many of his flashes. He is the torturer, the killer, the leader. Of course.

Angel is now looking through the eyes of the girl.

The big man above leans on his stick. Hugie's eyes bulge until they are ringed with white. His smile yawns. His skin ripples like that of an anaconda tightening about its prey. It is a black animal that encases him. Slick. All muscle. Nothing like any aura Angel has seen before.

Of course.

Jimmy's voice broke through. "You okay?"

Angel shook his head, slapped his cheeks with his palms.

"Jesus. I feel like shit."

"You haven't looked good since you got back."

"This is different."

"Like what?"

"Like I was one big ulcer inside."

A white blur flashed by, and Jimmy pumped the gas and eased out, letting his engine race until the tour bus topped the hill, then he let out the clutch. They spun onto the road like a lynx he'd once seen bounding in the Yucatan jungle, quickly gaining ground, but as they crested the hill, the tour bus was nowhere in sight. Jimmy accelerated, yet still there was no sign of them, even though the one available turnoff that the bus could have taken would have left it visible, even to Angel, and struggling over deep ruts and in plain view on the open moors. Jimmy swore.

"Not again."

"You've lost them before?" Angel yelled, the wind whipping around the windshield and messing with his hearing.

"The last time, yes. Then they came down on me from nowhere."

"You never told me about it."

"Lil thought it best."

The jeep slowed, and Jimmy banked around a corner and onto a stretch of paved road that led to the local animal hospital. Angel squinted. Just ahead, a couple on mopeds struggled to negotiate the sandy shoulder. Suddenly, a deep pothole opened up before the jeep where none had been a second ago. In the rear view mirror, Angel saw a billowing dark cloud that licked at their tailgate. He could feel its cold edge.

"Jesus Christ!"

Jimmy cut the wheels as he swore, yet struck a rut with one back tire, jolting Angel out of his seat and jarring his arm against the door. A bigger rut opened up as the cloud engulfed their back end. Jimmy floored the accelerator, sailing over it, but again catching a back tire. The road turned into a mine field. The moped riders looked back, and accelerated as well, hoping to escape the instant potholes and the jeep closing on them, believing, perhaps, that they could pass into a smoother stretch of reality. Jimmy swerved to avoid a big hole and the two mopeders reacted, moving aside into a new rut. Angel watched them wipe out just beyond his door. Time slowed, stretching the scene out into an agonizing spin of tires and dust that felt like another hot flash in Angel's head.

The woman lost control as her handlebars turned, throwing her sideways from the seat, her head first and arms akimbo. He watched her windbreaker balloon with air. The gold chains twist on her neck. Her eyes bulged with disbelief. The cycle collapsed in an endless fall, while in slow motion the back of the woman's skull struck the square pole of a sign that read "Stop Ahead." Her neck twisted at an impossible angle, and she collapsed in a still heap.

The man witnessed this, each split second of trajectory and

impact; and as he turned forward again on his seat to jam the brakes, his front wheel dropped into another deep hole and wedged tight against the jagged lip of pavement. He rose from his seat as the tail of the moped bucked under him. For a moment he seemed to enjoy the sensation of flight, his legs straightening behind, his hands before him in a frontal dive until he saw where he might land: the green postage stamp of lawn before the animal hospital, the glass-cased poster board, the three foot pole with a sharp point and a tiny flag at half mast for someone's pet. His arms flailed then. His head and chest dropped below his legs. Angel saw the result like a horseshoe player sees the twisting of the prongs on his horseshoe, the opening that aligns just right for the steel post before it snaps on as a ringer. The man up-ended as the pole caught his lower jaw, lodging deep into his chest, impaling him through the long corridor of his alimentary canal. When Jimmy whipped past, the man spasmed and his bladder released in a dark stain on his white pants. The poster in the floodlit case they passed said, "Be Kind To Animals Week."

Angel held his stomach and coughed a mix of acid and half-digested vitamin pills over the top of the passenger door. The accident had taken fifteen seconds at best, at its worst it would cost Angel an eternity of nightmares.

Jimmy swerved off onto a dirt road, where the ruts and potholes were permanent, and here he managed to outdistance the menace that chased them in a camouflage of fog. He spun through several hairpin turns and banked into further branches of the road that kept Angel off balance, unable to dwell on the accidents he'd just witnessed or the bizarre circumstances that had evolved in so few hours. Angel felt relieved when they emerged into a familiar sweep of traffic, passed a few cars with dangerous abandon, and at last angled onto Main Street at the old Civil War Monument. Jimmy turned toward town, rattling his shocks over the cobbles, and cruised up Pine Street for home. Jimmy's palms relaxed from their stiff holds on the wheel. He began to work his jaw.

"What was that about?" Angel asked. "Why didn't we stop

to help those people?"

"Couldn't 'cause of Hugie. He's got some kind voodoo of power in that cane of his, I guess. He almost had us. I've felt the edges of that cold fog before."

He is the torturer, the killer, the leader. Of course.

"Shit. This is loony."

"Absolutely!", Jimmy said with a grimace as he pulled up in front of Lilith's and turned off the ignition. "It's survival."

Angel couldn't argue that. He had to accept that forces beyond the realm of ordinary explanation were at work. And given that, Lilith looked more and more like a force for good.

She stood in a white cotton dress in the doorway, just inside the shadow cast by the edge of the trim. She seemed anxious to reach them, anxious to talk, but reluctant as a B-movie vampire to enter the sunlight. Angel wished he had his camera with him. He saw in her a sad truth, a perfect woman flawed by a streak of agoraphobia.

"Hi," he said as he covered the distance to her in three strides.

"Hurry," she said as she held Angel close for a brief moment, then pushed them inside. "They'll be checking on us any moment. Jimmy, you know what we rehearsed."

Jimmy took a fist-sized wad of pink putty from the mail table inside the door and slipped out behind the rhododendron bushes that bloomed in sticky blossoms along the front of the house to the alley that cornered with Pine. He crouched, his face hidden in shadow inches from the curb.

Lilith pulled Angel back inside and slammed the door, rattling the loose glass. She smelled of dill weed, and he found that it mingled nicely with her natural musk; it intoxicated him. He pulled off his shades and looked into the green wilds of her eyes. They heard a car engine on the street, and she jerked him down the hall to a window which looked onto the side alley. The white minibus nosed from Pine Street around the corner of the house, just clearing the picket fence across the way and stopped dead before a big man in torn jeans, a navy blue windbreaker and a San Francisco Giants cap. Angel knew him as the roomer who squirreled himself

away in the back apartment above Lilith's kitchen, hunched over his Macintosh, typing out a novel under contract while the Red Sox fizzled in another pennant drive on the TV. He picked the cat Sestina up from the road.

"What's Lucius doing?"

"A stall tactic. Hugie's in our territory now. And he can't see where Jimmy's hiding."

Lucius scratched his beard and ambled through a picket gate and into the garden, shoving through the back door as the minibus started by again. They met in the kitchen. He sang a few lines about being fool enough for some woman's love, then dropped the cat on the floor from shoulder height.

"My good deed for the day. Back to life as we know it."

"Thanks," Jimmy said to him as he entered the kitchen and the big man exited. They heard his heavy steps on the stairs.

"You got the crystal in place?" Lilith asked Jimmy.

"Just inside the wheel well. Sealed in by the putty."

"Good. We can track him now."

Angel wasn't listening though. A couple pieces to the puzzle clicked into place as his mind played back past the couple they'd left on the road as they sailed to their fates. He remembered his sudden vision of a woman being murdered in a pit. He felt nausea grip him as he put a face on the child with the electric carving knife. She'd been the little girl on the boat, the one with leukemia. He knew with certainty now what had aggravated her sickness, what infected the summer people and everyone else on Nantucket. He'd barely survived a brush with it himself.

His smile yawns.

Angel slumped into a chair as he flashed on the scene again.

The girl stands at the pit's edge, holding up the woman's heart and passing up the bloody point to the people above. There's the whirl of some device, a camera maybe. Hugie inserts the point back into his club. This is the man whose shadowy presence moves through many of his flashbacks. Of course, this man is the torturer, the killer, the leader. Of course. But there's something behind him as well. A bigger

force. Something more evil than the vilest evil Angel has experienced. A connection that no one should be capable of missing. But he had.

The big man leans on his stick, which seems to have an aura of its own. His eyes bulge until they are ringed with phosphorous. His smile yawns. His skin ripples; it is a black animal that eels out of the stick and encases him, then flows back. It looks slick. All muscle. Nothing like any aura Angel has seen before.

No human aura, that is.

The woman on the ground is an empty husk, her aura gone. The animal has fed.

4

Angel felt content to rest in Lilith's arms that next morning. He'd drowned the events of the previous day—and the visions—in an evening of straight Beefeater's on ice, and now he felt the need for emotional rescue.

"Lilith?"

"Yes," she whispered. She lay on her side towards him and nibbled his ear. "Ask me anything."

"Something's bothering me."

"More flashes?"

"No. I want to know what's going on? I've heard what you make Jimmy believe. What you'd have me think. But there's something bigger behind this."

"Sometimes a truth stripped bare is ugly."

"No bullshit homilies, okay?"

Lilith tensed beside him.

He tried to slide his arm around her and stroke her fine black hair, tried to kiss the side of her head. "Look, I'm confused. Just the facts, Ma'am. Joe Friday here."

Lilith turned onto her back, upset and hurt.

"You're about as tactful as Joe fucking Friday, too."

Staring at the side of her head, he noticed the beauty in her aura close-up, and the flecks of gold and silver throughout it swirled like gases about a large star. It was as if she wore a gauzy, feline mask with petite ears and jade eyes.

"Okay. August 16th, 6:45 AM. The woman tells the man her life story. It goes like this. Born on Nantucket in the 1840's to a Greek merchant and his Quaker wife. Grew up after The

Great Fire destroyed the island's mercantile strength."

"But you..."

Lilith reached over and placed a finger across his lips. He nibbled at it, signaling his willingness to acquiesce. She withdrew it, unwilling to be intimate.

"She silences her interruption and continues," she said in narration.

"Many attributed the fire to greed. The poorer Quakers called it retribution. A few practical women, including myself, believed it was caused by a force we called The Presence. Something to do with tribal magic and blood sacrifice that stowed in from the Pacific whaling grounds. Under the guise of suffragists and feminists, we began to muster our own strength. For while the minions of this force were short-lived, we developed longevity, a compensation for our lesser conjurings. We took on new names."

"Who else is in this with you?"

"I'm the last. The Presence has four acolytes, however. Three of which I know, and a fresh one whose identity I haven't discovered. They're changing the rules. Getting careless. Letting it all show. They're confident of rendering me useless. Maybe finishing me off."

Lilith shifted again onto the side that faced him, bumping her knees against his hips. He looked through her aura into the pale greens of her irises. She summoned a smile, but it relaxed into a somber expression.

"Angel. Please don't use that gruff exterior on me. I appreciate who you are underneath. You know that."

"I can be gruff under there as well. You're still taking it too personal."

"It is personal. It's you and me."

"Yeah, but you and me are only a few months old. It's been a long time before that. I'm learning this over again. You've got to learn to handle my ways. To cope."

She sighed. "And it's been even longer for me. Much, *much* longer. I play it tough out of the bedroom, but I'm exposed here."

He stroked her hair again and let his mind spin.

"Does playing tough mean keeping secrets?"

"About my powers, yes. They center from this old house and the crystals gathered here through the decades by my sisters. We survived on secrecy." Lilith fluffed a pillow under her head. "You're avoiding the real subject, though. Doesn't it bother you that I'm that old?"

"I have witnessed magic before. I'm not alarmed."

"Oh? Really? 6:55. Sound the trumpets. Spread the news. The mystery man reveals some of *his* secrets."

Angel poked her in the ribs. "Hey. Being nice goes both ways."

"I thought you could handle it? You could cope!"

"Look, you want to hear my story?"

Lilith nodded, staring past him at the big crystal on the dresser.

"Okay. There was battle at Uxmal, like there were at many old ruins in Mexico and Belize. And an explosion of mystical origin, I'd say. I've never pieced it together right. But plenty of guys went home with serious problems 'cause of things like that. I was aged several years in a day."

"You told me that was the albinism."

"You told me you were born in 1963. The year Kennedy was shot."

Lilith pushed away from him, working her head into the crack between their pillows.

"So we're both good at cover-ups. Especially you."

"What do you mean, especially me? You're the one that's a hundred and fifty years old. Remember?"

"And you're a cloak."

"A what?"

"A cloak. You can neutralize and cover the traces of magic within your sphere of influence."

"That's bullshit!"

"You did it at Ram's Pasture. When they couldn't detect you two."

He ran his fingers along the scars at his temple. "But..."
There was knock on the door.

"Yes," she said, sitting forward in surprise. Angel had

never seen her surprised, if it was that.

Jimmy's voice. "There's a body in Mill Park. I picked it up on the scanner."

She turned to Angel. Her look spoke volumes.

"I'll go with him, okay? But I wanted to work this out with you."

"I know," she said as she pulled aside the sheets to let him up. "We'll try again."

Angel struggled into his jeans and a white tee shirt, and pulled the door open as he tied his sneakers on. Jimmy stood leaning against the jamb, one of his infamous grins spread across his face. He gave the effect of strength and boundless energy, of impetuosity. His tee shirt read *Mars Needs Surf Nazis* with appropriate movie captions.

"Another morning. Just like the other morning."

Angel punched hard into Jimmy's shoulder and said, "Shove it, asshole." He grabbed his camera and accessories from the hall table.

They left by the back door, passing by where Angel kept his Triumph under a blue tarp, and through the hedge by a house where a family of fine artists lived with the mother who'd taught them their craft. A steep road led up to the Old Mill, and they maintained an urgent stride, one that left both Angel and Jimmy breathless. Angel wondered what kind of life Jimmy had had before Lilith took him in, what background of broken homes and racial violence and abusing foster parents. He knew that Lilith treated him special; Jimmy's loyalty ran deep. He'd enlisted willingly in the battle. Angel wasn't sure where his own loyalty ran, though, or how hard he'd fight for a cause he still couldn't quite believe existed, but he knew Lilith was a worthy general. He felt strong ties there.

Two cruisers, one car, and a State Policeman's Bronco were parked across from the Mill, at the edge of a wooded park thick with scotch broom and tall bushes. Jimmy and Angel followed a brush trail into the heart of the park, where an ambulance, following a dirt road that bordered the western side of the park, backed through a gap in the rail fence.

Several cops stood away from a recent excavation in the ground where a tarp covered—Angel assumed—the deceased. They walked up to where two reporters from the local paper talked with a State Policeman. One of the local cops stepped in front of Jimmy. He was the cop that had hassled Angel downtown just a few nights before. He pushed his holograph lens sunglasses back on his nose and gave Angel an appraising look that stopped on his camera.

"You got business here? There'll be no photos."

Jimmy started to say something about them taking a walk, but Angel interrupted.

"Free country," he chimed in.

The cop smiled, displaying a row of teeth as crooked as old headstones. "Ya can say that again. Well, there's been a homicide. And I'm free ta question ya as suspects."

Angel ignored him. He concentrated on the medic that turned back the canvas for a look at the victim's throat. It was cut.

"Well from here," Angel said, "it looks as though we'd make piss poor prospects. It being several days after the fact."

As the cop looked back to the scene, Angel noticed how his aura shifted from just oily to dusky blue, then to blue-black. The hair prickled on Angel's neck. Bad influences here, he thought.

"How can ya tell that? Ya must know somethin'. And that makes me even more suspicious." He grinned. "Looks like you're in the wrong place at the right time. You're mine."

The man's aura darkened to a permanent black, and at the same time, Angel began to lose clarity in his vision, as if the cop exerted an influence on him. Jimmy's face dissolved. Everything moved around Angel in grainy blurs. A dull ache bloomed in his forehead.

"You forgot, man. You were supposed to run a check on me. I started out as a paramedic. I saw more bodies than you've seen naked women." Angel tried to stand square before the indistinct image of the cop, and he gave him as hard a stare as he'd received moments ago. "Lots more, I'd say. Dead *and* alive."

Angel sensed the steam that bottled up within the man. His aura crackled with crimson lightning.

"Got a problem here, Curtis?" It was the other cop, the Police Chief—if Angel matched the voice correctly to his memory—and a native with a laid-back disposition, a practical sense of humor, and the nickname of Captain Blow Dry. His real name was Coffin. Beyond that, Angel's recollection of him was as limited as his eyesight. There were dozens of Coffins on island.

"Just determining if these vagabonds are suspects, sir."

"Keep it in your jockeys, Curtis. These men live at the bottom of the hill, a couple streets down. They're just curious."

Angel nodded toward the man's voice. The angry cop moved his hand around his face, then his image diminished, faded into gray scale. He said, "So let 'em read about it in the *Inky Mirror*." Then Angel heard the voice to his left. He was talking to the medic that inspected the corpse.

Coffin lowered his voice. "Don't mind him. He's got a nose for sniffing out trouble, though a bit overzealous. But he's staying on permanent. I've promoted him as of this morning."

"That seems quick."

"He's a quick study."

"What's his name," Jimmy asked.

"Curtis Boggs."

The radio inside the police car crackled with static and an urgent voice. Coffin responded.

"Jesus!" he yelled moments later. "A tour bus just ran off the side of Steamboat Wharf."

Jimmy wanted to investigate the wharf accident, but Angel told Jimmy that his temples throbbed, and that his eyes hurt badly. The flash came almost as the event happened.

Fingers groping for a purchase on the seat.

The bus spins its wheels as it loses control. No brakes. A woman near the front screams, but it's muffled as she slams into the seat in front of her. The bus strikes the low lip that

forms a rim about the wharf, up-ends, and flips off the side of the dock towards North Wharf. It strikes the water on its back.

People in a heap on the inside. Water swirling around them through the open windows. Fingers groping. Shouts. Yells. The smell of panic and diesel fuel. The sound of water rushing in.

The fingers groping. Grabbing other arms, other faces, other people in panic. Red streaks where they've clawed each other.

Red in the swirling waters.

Jimmy agreed to help Angel home for breakfast. He had trouble with his bladder anyways, he said. "Curtis Boggs," mumbled Jimmy as he led Angel by the arm down the hill and all the way home. "Curt Is Boggs. Curty S'boggs. Urtiscy Oggsby." The sounds of it bothered Jimmy. Angel was bothered by other things, though. He'd expected the body under the tarp to be the woman in his earlier vision, her skin marked with strange symbols. She was marked, yes, but she was a different woman. A lustrous Asian-American teen with homecoming queen or junior miss written all over her epitaph. How many young people like that disappeared here? Kids on a secret visit. Or that had no family. Or runaways. Hugie must have had a talent for spotting them. How many died in this hidden war? What bothered him the most, though, what ate at him, was his own situation. His eyesight was getting worse, and he couldn't cover it up much longer. Plus, he was falling for a woman with an unusual personality, to say the least. Considering all this, his life seemed complicated enough without getting involved in a magical gang war. He tried out several variations of the "why me?" syndrome; and though nothing unnatural occurred on their walk home, nothing alarming except a worsening of his migraine, and a repeat of the images of drowning tourists, he felt shattered. His insides felt crushed.

He decided to spend the rest of the morning alone in his room upstairs. Recovering. Putting things in perspective. He

lay on his bed with shards of Lilith's crystals taped over his eyelids, while his mind re-sorted his systems of belief and put the events of the last several days in sharper categories of emotional and physical involvement. At last, Angel fell into a shallow and restless sleep, and into a dream about Lilith beside him in bed. But her face disappeared. Only her lips remained: grotesque, toothless, a fat slippery tongue swaying like a cobra from the basket of her mouth. She reached for him, fingers groping. She held him with the urgency of her arms, but the face remained the same, the face of a remora. She kissed him and he felt her lips lock onto his, siphoning the air from his lungs, creating a suction that threatened to draw the juices from his skull. He fought her. Her tongue wrapped around his neck like a great finger. The tip lashed at his eyes, blinding them with poison. More fingers held him down. Too weak to leap from bed and run, he thrashed out with his arms. He struck nothing. Just a twist of sheets and pillows that had turned black with shadow. Black as eternity.

Black, and twitching like his hands. *His fingers.*

Angel stumbled to the second floor bathroom and emptied his soul into the toilet bowl, praying for delivery from this vicious form of second sight that had usurped his first. He'd never had a vision like the last, all run together from his own memory to a dream that seemed as real as it was disturbing. A foul thing churned up inside him like a ball of snakes, and he let loose again. The last vivid images passed. He threw his head back and stood, dashed his face with water from the sink. Angel felt his way along the wall back to his room and collapsed on the stuffed chair near his stereo. He searched aimlessly for his sneakers.

By the time he'd finished dressing and returned again from a wash-up in the bathroom, he could see shapes and make out a certain depth to the objects in his room. The bare light bulb that hung from the ceiling became a distinct, sunny globe. The painted settings on his stereo amplifier were readable. He joined Lilith and Jimmy downstairs for mid-af-

ternoon tea and dill bread...and a long moment of silence after telling them the other day's vision about the woman in the pit and the demented girl, then about the bus, and then about his bad, bad dream.

"The Presence used to be wholesome in comparison," Lilith commented. "Just a couple sacrifices each year. Straight forward and impossible to stop. But now there's a twist in its people."

Jimmy nodded. "A bus load of drowned tourists is one helluva twist."

Lilith felt that they'd forced Hugie's hand with the last caper on the Cliff Road, and Hugie's cohorts had slipped and tried to dispose of the girl in the body bag there in town. They'd been interrupted again, and left it in the park without giving a damn about it being exposed, just as they'd destroyed the rival tour bus without a care. These were calling cards serving notice to Lilith that she was powerless to thwart them in any real sense, and that morning had been the final proof. Hugie and his predecessors had never been capable of affecting people in the house, of penetrating its walls with The Presence, yet he'd gotten to Angel and possessed him with a lucid nightmare. Lilith was sure that he had. She'd sensed it when he touched a large tourmaline on her table.

"I say we let loose some muscle," Angel said.

It was only the third day of his conscious enlistment in the sorcerer's struggle, but Angel was ready to talk offensive strategy. Not that a blind warrior was useful for anything more.

Lilith frowned and sipped a mixture of orange and cranberry juices over ice. "I thought we were."

Jimmy turned from where he fried a burger in a cast iron skillet blackened with years of grease.

"Hold up. I have to piss, and I don't want to miss any of this. I like the idea." He pointed at his latest make-believe movie shirt: *Surf Sadists of Satan*. "Time we got tough."

When he was gone, Angel pushed his plate away and reached for his coffee. "You ready to let someone else make decisions?"

"Hell no!"

"I thought so. You're into control. Doesn't matter if it's places or situations. Or people. You have to be in control of them."

Lilith took a slow breath. He sensed the tension within her.

"I've wanted to let go for decades. For a century maybe. You just don't know. But now I'm afraid. Afraid there's too much at stake." She set her glass down. "But if I was desperate, I'd trust your judgment over Jimmy's. He's got a hot temper."

"In my judgment, we need hot tempers and fire power."

"Stupid idea." She shook her head. "I think it's suicidal."

Jimmy bounded into the kitchen, sending several cats skittering into the corners. Sestina wandered off in a snit.

"You were supposed to wait!"

"Nothing missed. I'm suggesting guerrilla tactics. They're beginning to use it on us, so let's hit back."

Jimmy slapped a tight fist into his other palm. "I'm stoked."

"You're fools. Typical male hotheads and fools."

"Look," Angel said. "We can work independent of your opinions."

"I don't know," said Jimmy.

Angel had crumpled the napkin in his lap and dropped it near the salt and pepper shakers when Hugie's tour bus rumbled through the alley again. He smelled smoke wafting from the hallway.

The smell of panic and diesel fuel.

Lilith tensed, her aura melting until a shawl of bright gold drew about her. She raised her arms, let the gold vine up her arms and spin into a whirlwind of flickering light. She sent a ball of lightning spinning into the hallway, and Angel heard the flat intake of an implosion.

The sound of water rushing in.

He ran out into the hall. The smoke cleared as Jimmy opened the front door, and little seemed damaged. The runner on the stairs smoked where it covered the lowest step and riser. A curtain hung in smoking, moth-eaten tatters; it appeared to have been the origin of the fire. The edge of a stack

of flyers and newspapers on the mail table was curled and brown. Angel noticed something flopping like a fish under the table, and pulled the table away from the wall. It was a cat, or what had once been a cat. Now it consisted of lungs and entrails in an impossible twist. It took a moment to realize that the cat had been turned inside out. Jimmy covered his mouth. It squirmed once more, all muscle reflex, and lay still in a pool of its own blood and bile. Scorched fur surrounded the thing, giving a clue to its original identity. Angel tore down the rest of the burned curtain and covered it.

When they returned, Lilith looked overwhelmed, as if she'd inhaled too much of the smoke. She coughed with a rattle in her throat.

"Take deep breaths," Angel advised her.

"It's not that," she said as he gripped her arm across the table. "They've never been able to physically touch the house before. And the next attack will be more serious than these last two. I can sense it."

Jimmy stood to the side with a look of trouble about the set of his jaw—a "don't-ask" look.

"Jimmy!" She tensed. "How bad is it?"

"It's Sestina. Whatever got in scorched her bad." His face cracked; despair leaking into his voice. "Only she's turned inside out. Just inverted like a reversible coat."

"And dead now." Lilith said it deadpan, without intonation.

"Yes," Angel confirmed. "Sorry."

"Sestina was one of us. They'd stolen her powers years ago, and she couldn't turn back to human." She covered her face. "Rest in peace, sister. I'm sorry I did this to you."

Angel shook his head. "You can't blame yourself."

"She was caught in my spell to snuff the fire. I did it."

"Fire!" Jimmy yelled, and he stepped out the back door into the yard. "More fire!"

Outside, smoke rose from along the fence line to the house; the whole fence was burning. The pickets across the road, and up Pleasant Street and Pine Street for several houses

were all ringing their yards in flame. Angel stepped out into the garden to watch a commotion gather at the corner of Pleasant and Lyon. A thin blond girl screamed out a name—Timalyne, if Angel understood the name correctly. Another teen, tall with red hair, had panicked on the balcony of her second floor apartment when the flames crept up the outside shingles. The railing had broken through where she'd leaned on it, and she fell, impaling herself back-first on the sharp pickets of the burning fence below. Two of them had poked up through her back into her chest, distending her breasts, parodying the womanhood she'd never reach. A broken doll—Growing Up Skipper no more. The burning wood continued to smolder, cooking through the flesh, and charring two aureoles into her "Dire Straits" tee shirt.

"Jesus!" Lilith said after a groan.

Angel stared back in concern at the wasted, catatonic look in Lilith's eyes. She stood in the entryway, listening to the whining sirens of approaching fire trucks, her body rigid. She'd been tense since he'd told her of his dreams. Suddenly, she'd grown upset by everything. Almost fatalistic. She edged back inside while Angel and Jimmy moved his motorcycle to safety in the middle of the yard. Then the back entry burst into flame, sending her screaming into the house.

Angel said, "To hell with sitting around. We've taken enough shit."

And the fire trucks dowsed them with water. Angel fell back against the smoldering jamb, trying to block the force of the water with his arms. He felt as if he were trapped.

The sound of water rushing...

5

Angel and Jimmy—both dressed in Angel's old fatigues—hid in a stand of Japanese Pines on the edge of a bluff called The Cliff, on a property that bordered Guildpole Manor. Jimmy described the property as he studied it through high-powered binoculars for signs of activity in a big glassed-in sun room at the west end of the building. Angel fidgeted with his shirt collar, and played with a garrote wire he'd dug out of his old munitions bag. He felt uncomfortable about leaving Lilith alone at the house.

"Hey, Angel. What have you heard about Dora Guildpole?"

Angel scratched his back against the rough bark of a pine. He settled in the dark pocket of shadow under the tree, his head forward. He didn't have to see what transpired; couldn't if he wanted to. He was tired of seeing things. Tired of remembering things.

"Yeah. The photography crowd knows something of her. She's a vidcam buff."

"Well, I've been here on surf shop deliveries a couple times. It's huge inside her estate. Thirty, maybe forty rooms in three wings. But the woman's got an obsession with collecting. Especially bargains. She can't pass a flea market or a bathing suit sale without loading up, and I mean daily. Except for the kitchen and sun room, the place is packed to the gills, they say. She lives in the old servant's quarters in back."

Jimmy chewed the end off a chocolate bar. "This lady even collects cans from the trash barrels in town. And canceled

stamps from the bins in the post office."

"Come on. She must be loaded."

"Money's not important to her."

Angel tested the garrote on a fat mushroom. The head rolled away. "Yeah, but soda cans?"

"It's an obsession. I told you that. She collects everything."

"What's she doing in Hugie's clan then? What's she get out of it?"

"Power, I guess. Dora must be fond of gathering and exercising her influence. She's probably manipulated corporation board rooms from here to L.A. and back."

"I just had a bad thought. A much simpler thought."

"What?" Jimmy set the binoculars aside and leaned back against another tree. "What could be worse than drugs and power plays and murder?"

There's the whir of some device, a camera maybe.

"Collecting home videos."

That took the wind out of Jimmy. Doing all those terrible things was one thing to this kid, but worshipping evil within themselves was another. Jimmy stared off at the string of clouds billowing into thunderheads to the north. The wind moved the pine boughs and fingered his wiry curls.

"Hey, Angel. You think Lilith's safe back at the house?"

Angel stretched out in the pine needles. That was a touchy subject. He nodded, but it felt like a lie.

"She said so. Said she'd use some potent spells for protection."

"Yet she was against us doing this."

"And what were we supposed to do? Stay cooped up there waiting for one of us to fry? Or popcorn our guts out like the cat?"

"No. I just don't like to see you two disagree."

"Jimmy, I don't need a goddamn peacemaker. Okay?"

"She's pissed at you," he said.

Angel grunted. Jimmy didn't speak again until he observed someone walking among the tables in the sun room.

"I think it's a caterer. He's laying out food."

"Any sign of Guildpole?"

"No. But I see Von Slater now. He can't keep his fingers out of the spread."

"A good description of all of them, I'd say. What's the big time businessman doing here?"

"Don't you remember. He was the guy with the glasses."

"Up at the pasture barn?"

"Roger, Wilco. On a mission with Dora Dumpster and Hugie. I'd say his motives are transparent."

Angel listed them. "Greed. Greed. And more Greed. Odds are that his millions are in drug dollars. Coke certainly figures in their dealings here somewhere."

But the pain wells there inside her, somewhere under the soft and dreamy layers of coke.

"He's started up several restaurants with cash. Bought out the newspaper, then used it to print slander against the school principles, setting himself up as a crusader to get on the town committees and then into the State House. Now he hosts Washington bigwigs and Presidential pretenders for summer vacations. This man has designs on the governorship."

"And beyond," Jimmy added. "He'll keep the news of what we saw on Mill Hill out of this week's paper. And I bet it's three lines of nothing in next week's. Quite a triangle, these folks."

"And the fourth player?"

Jimmy scratched at a two-day growth of stubble. "Lil thinks it's this broad Vargas from Baltimore. The one who wants to build malls everywhere and have little bus lines color-coded in pinks and greens."

"No."

Angel thought different. The developer might be a class A asshole, but her kind weren't strategic enough for Hugie. He needed a goddamn big set of drawers to cover his ass, with a bigger weave of intrigue to it than real estate developers and eccentric bitches and small town tin emperors. The possibilities could be narrowed; he just couldn't think straight enough to do it. He'd caught Lilith's worrying disease, and his head was messed around by the bloody visions of these

people's deeds, and by too much thinking about them. He'd learned in Central America that emotional survival depended on not thinking too much, not dwelling on the grim and gruesome. But this was Nantucket—land of the cloistered and the carefree. It just wasn't supposed to happen this far removed from Brooklyn or the barrios. It wasn't supposed to fucking happen here at all.

"What are you thinking, Angel?"

"I'm trying not to, but what I think is we're missing some obvious clue. Just suppressing this crime wave from the local newspaper isn't going to stop the police investigations. Where's their ace?"

"Got me. Their power can overcome quite a bit, though." Jimmy looked like a jittery blur to Angel as he shifted positions and searched around with his binoculars for more details to relate. "Hey. Guildpole just made the scene inside. And outside, her limo just pulled up with a guest."

"Can you see who it is?"

"Roger. She's talking out in the open with the chauffeur. Straight brown hair, with red highlights. Middle-aged. Proper in a conservative suit. She's no bimbo."

"A colorful scarf? Red, maybe."

"Roger. How did you know? You're not even looking."

"Shit!"

"You psychic or what?"

"I'm just remembering. Hugie took an interest in me the night I talked with this woman on the steamboat. She was concerned about her little girl, the crazed one in my vision. Keep an eye peeled on this bitch."

"Oh! The girl with the carving knife!" Jimmy's voice betrayed his disgust. He'd been deeply affected by the account Angel gave of that ritual murder. Jimmy believed the vision to be real. They all did.

"Yeah. Lilith thinks that wasn't a coincidence. My meeting the girl and being watched by Lewis."

"And also that you moved into Pine Street and became a force for good with us. I certainly don't consider it luck. You've got a power in you. I know it's so."

"Well, I wish I knew what it's good for."

"Don't put yourself down. That's just what you said to Lil. Don't put yourself down."

"Yeah? Well, I'm too messed up with the migraines and nightmares to be worth a shit."

"But your visions helped us pinpoint the crimes."

Angel didn't know what to do with this praise. It smacked of hero worship. He grabbed the last of Jimmy's bar and ate it.

"Hey!" Jimmy yelped, then ducked low under the protection of the branches in case anyone heard him.

"Hey what? Shut up and get back on the job, snoop."

Jimmy began to detail the meeting of the dinner guest with Guildpole: the hugging, the mothering manners of Guildpole, the pleasure that beamed from the middle-aged mother as they sat within the glass room that overlooked the verdant lawns and flower gardens. Angel realized that this was the estate he'd seen in his flash about the girl with leukemia. The mother had been sucked in by deceit like so many others, believing, it seemed, that The Presence could cure all even if the cure wounded deeper than the disease. Here's where the white spider lured many an innocent fly for their web. Those that hadn't already made the mistake of spewing out their down-and-dirty, down-on-luck story to the first cabbie that pulled up at the steamboat in a white Caddie bus. Those that even had a shot at settling in and finding a job like all the good little summer people. Angel saw now that Lilith had concentrated too much on Hugie. They'd made an excellent choice for retaliation in Dora. She, too, was a force to be reckoned with.

"The girl appears to be heading back toward town."

"Alone?"

"Just with the chauffeur."

"Now we wait for Von Slater to leave."

Jimmy sat up, on alert. "No need. Looks as if Dora and Von Slater are going for a cruise in his Trans Am. They're leaving by the other gate. The one that leads out to the Cliff Road."

"God, what luck."

"Well, we have you as a cloak. I'm sure they feel secure."

Angel patted his munitions bag. "I certainly do. Let's see how good my homemade willy-peter is."

A trail led from the stand of pines to the fence that comprised the eastern border to the big estate, as if someone had established regular watch over the property, but it turned away from the fence and disappeared in a stand of deeper woods that snaked along the edge of the cliff in front of them, part of a network that afforded invisibility to deer when close to town. It offered the same protection to Angel and Jimmy, as long as they didn't try to enter from the open, bluff side of the Guildpole property. The trees were cut there, and they would be exposed. When they'd scaled the high, solid fence and dropped to a crouch behind a conveniently placed row of thorn bushes on the other side, Angel asked for the field glasses. Moisture clouded the eyepieces, making a mess of an already blurred view, as if he were back in the patchy forests of Central America, trying to spot troop movements in the world beyond or struggling to make out a simple truth like the sun, or a tent, or a man crouching in the foliage, only to have a hard rain complicate this by stippling the lenses' surface. At that moment he felt the limitations of his sight. Limitations he'd not fully accepted. He was on a raid, a routine he'd found exhilarating in the past, but he now found himself hesitant. Paralyzed by his disability. Something about the estate seemed to sap his confidence, some ground wire buried at its dark heart.

"Shake a leg, Angel. They could be back at any moment."

Angel accepted this as a truth of the moment, and followed Jimmy across the wide strip of lawn, ducking from an ornamental shrub to a low tree, then sprinting up to the closest wing of the mansion. From their lookout they'd chosen a ground floor room for entry, one with windows shrouded from within by curtains that were discolored by the sun, yellowed in a way that made them look—to Angel—sunken and jaundiced as his father's eyes in his last hours on Earth. They hoped for an unused room. Jimmy jacked up the edge of the window a fraction with a crowbar and Angel slipped

the garrote wire in the crack, straining to follow its hazy line as it tapped along the glass, sending a loop up over the turn latch. He hooked the latch with the third try and gave it a solid tug to the left. The lock opened, and Jimmy pushed the window up and pushed Angel through. Angel gave Jimmy a boost in, and they eased the window down, backing against a hanging rack of zippered bags. They'd entered a room converted to clothing storage, and Angel imagined what they held.

Dora no doubt collected old wedding dresses, or cotillion gowns. No, Angel thought, Dora collected white leather outfits fitted with myriads of straps, harnesses, and sharp steel studs. She'd like spike boots. Dora would favor upper class bondage.

Jimmy switched on his big flashlight.

"Oh my god?"

Angel didn't like the sound of it. It sounded like Jimmy's words to Lilith after Sestina caught a fatal dose of magic on Pine Street.

"There's name tags on these bags. With brief histories and accounts of what was known about the women. And dates circled in red."

Angel felt the shakes begin. Something terrible bloomed in the gray space behind his eyes. Myriads of visions swirled. With violent endings.

"Open one," he said.

Jimmy eased the brass zipper down on two and fumbled inside them. "Blood stained clothes. We've got evidence here. We can't take this place out now."

"Why?"

"We can use this to nail their ass."

"Who'll believe it? Who'll investigate before Dora and Hugie get wind of it through Von Slater and move the collection?" Angel felt the material of the clothing bags. "No. These bags are fireproof. We'll put the tags inside as many as possible, then set the charges elsewhere. Some will survive."

Jimmy began to stuff tags into bags at a hurried pace. Angel followed at a slower rate, hampered by a lack of light and the

red flashes that throbbed in his temples, pushing to escape, to flood his brain with dire truths. He stuffed one tag into a bag and found his hand pressing against something stiff and leathery, something dry.

"Shine your light in this one, Jimmy."

Jimmy brushed his arm aside and poked the flash in. "Oh shit. Oh, no! Oh..."

Angel could see the dim outline of arms and legs and didn't have to see anything more. He smelled the faint odor of embalmer's fluid. Angel held Jimmy against him as the kid gulped air and sobbed.

"Remember, Jimmy," he said with tenderness in his voice for his friend, but a hard stone where his heart had been just ten minutes ago. "She's obsessed. Money means nothing. Shit, nothing means nothing to her. She's a fucking collector. "Right?"

Jimmy nodded and recovered, tapping a reserve of composure within himself. "Right."

They found the door to the room and opened it with caution. Even without the flashlight, they could make out the contents of the next room in the twilight that fell like silver dust through a small skylight: stuffed chairs shrouded with ghostly coverlets, walls adorned with native dress and anthropological antiques, a circular bench or table that dominated the central portion of the room. Yes, and a vidcam mounted on a tripod. Angel took the flash from Jimmy and hooded the face with his fingers, letting thin beams slice out into the gloom when he switched it on. They'd entered another chattel house of wonders.

The room did not resemble a collection of artifacts as much as the distillation of a single culture. Besides spears and clothing and misshapen masks with faces that leered brightly within the beams, the room gathered field samples from every walk of life. Old bottles preserved a variety of fruits and foods. A fan of crude eating utensils resembled a clock, a marker of the passage of time. Displays of fire pits and models of frond huts filled the room's corners. Life-size statues depicted bizarre poses, many shown with stone

knives. Angel understood what these meant in a collective sense. They gave flesh to the tribal history of The Presence.

Above the circular slab at the center of the room, the skin of a woman—completely tattooed—was stretched upon a reed frame and suspended from the ceiling, and beside the slab stood a figure of a native with intricate tattoos, its hands raised, poised to swing a sword or stick, though the hands were empty.

The atmosphere inside the room pressed on him like a great hand.

Torch light. The low hum of voices beyond and outside of view. The spirit-man that bent before her and pulled up her eyelids. He spoke. To everyone, to no one. His face flowed like the surf upon the coral shore. He made her drink a bitter concoction. He raised the spiked club above his head.

Above her head.

"Is it here?" asked Jimmy beside him.

Angel stared. He didn't turn to face Jimmy when he spoke.

"If so, we'd feel it."

"Then where?"

"I believe it's like you said once. Within Hugie's cane. I think that's used for a sacrificial club." He pointed toward the statue. "It probably came back from a whaling expedition in the hands of that figure."

Jimmy sighed. "Then this is all we're here to burn. We'll have to get the club some other time."

"Yeah. We'll only use a few packets."

Jimmy spread four small packets of prepared white phosphorus about the room while Angel took flash-aided photos and primed the packets with timed fuses. Angel knew what value he held for the team now. Weapons and a cool head under pressure. First, he could make a professional job of arson. Walk away and let the phosphorous explode. Hear about it over the CB. Second, he'd feel no remorse. And as to the stress factor of the wizard's war, that kind of shit could be stomached. These weren't the tragedies of the living that

pained him with their immediacy. He'd seen worse than the embalmed victims hanging there like so much merchandise. They were sacks of bone sheathed in papery skin. Empty, not suffering.

But these thoughts segued into another hot flash as he stared up at the skin of the woman flying like a kite above the room. Though he managed to block out the full technicolor effects, he saw the Asian girl found at Mill Park, saw her being held down and scarified and chained to a post. Kept on a mattress in a barn. Forced to witness a blood sacrifice in the same sand pit he'd envisioned before. She'd not become one herself, however, for she was Hugie's plaything. He'd pulled all her teeth under sedation and forced her to satisfy his sexual perversions, stoking her with gourmet food and crack and making her pray long hours before the greased altar of his body, yet excusing her from abuse, from the sadism she knew he could inflict so easily, until she was grateful to him for it, all twisted up and grateful for the moments when he filled her throat with his godhood. Yes, he'd spared her the pain. Until the end, when he could no longer restrain himself. When the Presence must have coursed full force in his blood. When he'd sliced her throat from chin to sternum and sated his supreme agitation in a manner befitting demons.

Angel shivered. He couldn't purged the innocents from his head. His face figured in there among the images of the victims and the living ones, the living left wounded by remembrance.

Jimmy had to drag Angel out of the manor and across the lawn, but by the time they reached the cliff, looking back on the lawn in shadow at first twilight, Angel felt as if he'd taken his last blow to the psyche. He could steel himself now. It had taken time to accept the reality of what was going down on Nantucket, to get control of himself and acclimate again to death, but he was no stranger to its kind of truths. None at all.

They collected their gear and drove the jeep out to the paved road. Using several familiar shortcuts and illegal

turns, Jimmy dropped Angel at Pine Street. The street lights flickered on, pooling light along the curb. He passed into the dark interior where crystals hung in arrangements from the ceilings and at every window, and when he reached the kitchen, Lilith looked up with a start from her pattern of Tarot cards and amethysts on the side table. She wore jogging pants and had a sweatshirt draped over her shoulders, as if she were going somewhere. She smiled weakly, a concession, perhaps, toward they're being loving again.

"Where's Jimmy?"

"We found a room of artifacts." He tapped his camera. "Took a roll."

"Tribal relics, I'd guess. Of those who worshipped The Presence long ago. We always suspected that."

"The stuff's there. We set charges and retreated. He went looking for Dora Guildpole's limousine."

"Why's he following Dora?"

Angel dropped his bags and sat on the stool beside her. He felt tired.

"The mother of the leukemia girl was a guest at the manor. She left with Dora's chauffeur. I didn't think there was much of a chance of tracking her down, but Jimmy wanted to give it a try."

"You didn't see the girl?"

"No."

"Shit. He's got the tap crystal that homes on Hugie's bus. And I've been trying to contact you and him through my CB unit. Jimmy's got me tuned out. How could you let him go off like that?"

Angel tried to see the situation the way Lilith must have. While Dora entertained the mother, Hugie used the sick girl for another ceremony, or at least got her prepared and loaded up in his cab. After the chauffeur delivered the mother home, the bitch would wait nervously for her girl to return. She'd know that what they did to cure her daughter was unsavory. Not wanting to guess just how much so. Unable to guess their true and unspeakable designs.

It was Hugie's bus that Jimmy would be following, that

they should have followed all along. There was nothing subtle about these people, yet they'd been duped into thinking otherwise. Or at least he had. Jimmy seemed to have plans within plans.

"Think, Angel. You weren't using your head."

"Then he's out to fight them on his own. Shit, that's stupid." Angel stood up and paced about the kitchen. He began rolling an apple back and forth across the counter, then flipping it up in his hand. "I had a feeling I shouldn't have let Jimmy run on his own."

"You wanted to lead things..."

Angel ignored her bait. "What do you think he's onto?"

"He's learned a great deal from me, but I doubt he can use the tap crystal to tune in like I can."

"You don't sound all that worried. Why?"

Lilith stood and pulled her sweatshirt down over her open-necked tee. "If he can't tap into them, he won't beat us there."

"Where?"

"I've figured out where their latest killing ground is located. I pulled off a miracle reading these cards and stones. That plus your descriptions of the sacrificial pit. You feel like taking a ride?"

Angel's eyelids perked. "On the Triumph?"

She shivered and nodded. "I'll chance going out, if you'll chance driving. It won't be easy."

"Okay for me. But agoraphobia's tough on you. You sure you won't panic?"

"Not from that. I don't have a phobia, Angel. I stay home because I have to."

"Because your power's in the crystals."

"More than you realize. Outside their influence, my age catches up with me." She gestured toward the garden in back. "We should leave now, before Guildpole Manor goes up. Then the traffic will be thick."

"Sure. Makes more sense than sitting here waiting."

He opened the sideboard near the stove and pulled out a near-empty bottle of vodka, poured himself three fingers in a glass. Sure. Why not? Why not see if there was any juice left

in him? Why not risk having Lilith shrivel like a prune, or worse, age to dust? Why not go at Hugie head on? Full steam ahead. Shit... Why not all be bloody goddamn crazy fools?

6

The waning half of a fisherman's moon hung like a shiny lure over the moors, dusting the prows of vertical clouds with light as they sailed before it, edging the bushes in pale cauls of silver that reflected back into the night. This airglow washed out the weaker radiance from the stars and made it possible for Angel to see some features of the landscape. In fact, as his eyes grew accustomed to it, he found he could see better than ever. Cars flashed past to his left like lemmings racing toward an oblivion he'd left behind. The beasts growled. Their stares blank. Angel became caught up in the counterflow against them. It had been months since he'd dared ride his motorcycle, but now he pushed the Triumph up a notch until it felt like he was doing seventy-five, maybe eighty. He took the bends by instinct and memory, with a feel for the hills that glowed about him. It felt good to ride again, good to have Lilith gripping him like a vise around the waist. The life and death tensions that put a strain on their fledgling love seemed to evaporate in the wind over the handlebars.

They hit the straight-away before the dump, and Angel could make out the man-made hill smoldering on the horizon—a minor fire, planned and probably controlled, but a fire nonetheless. It appeared like the corona of one of the Cape Cod cities when seen from the north shore—bright and somehow ominous. Angel slowed as three more cars approached with their headlights frozen on high beam. The first two swept past, but the last, a large flatbed truck, lost control and drifted into their lane, filling it with its bulk. Angel cut

into the opposite lane, crossing the space where the truck should have driven. The truck careened on into the brush along the shoulder behind them and struck the pines with a loud buckling of metal. A hundred feet later, he squinted when the sky lit up. The gas tank must have exploded.

Lilith squeezed him and yelled, "God help us!"

Angel knew they were on their own, though. When the headlights of another vehicle shown from the hill where the straight-away ended and the road curved around the dump site, Angel acted on gut instinct and turned off on a trail blocked by boulders. He rode over a narrow mound of sand to the extreme edge of the pile, batting the skeletal limbs of a small pine as he went. They followed the old truck access rutted by workers that had carried in construction loads and trees cut by the Department of Public Works, and when it angled out toward the perimeter of the dump, he rode instead up an embankment onto a short, parallel stretch of paved road—the original public entrance to the dump.

He cut the engine and coasted as far as he could. When they came to a stop, he kicked out his stand and let the bike rest.

Angel wondered if his sight was truly returning. Tattered remnants of black plastic flapped like ravens from the crests of bushes. Paper skittered along the overturned subsoil. The stench of garbage lingered where water flooded old tire marks and scooped-out depressions. Gulls shifted from their watch towers on soggy boxes and mounded plastic. He raised his hands before him and studied them, seeing clearly the ridges of callus and delicate whorls of his fingerprints. If the circumstances were any but the present, he would have sat and wept at the beauty of them, the newly found wonder he felt toward the bending of the joints, the half moons in his thumbnails, the raised deltas of veins and arteries, the fate lines in his palm. He read his own fate, reading good luck in the fact that he could see the lines at all. He felt ready for a good fight. Far more ready than he'd been that night he'd marched into the wilds of Uxmal and felt the sacred ruins of a dead culture possess him with dread, their tall silhouettes cutting a ominous swath out of a night bathed in a similar

moonlight.

"Do they know we're here?"

Lilith look drained. "I can't tell. There's no way of knowing if they sent that truck towards us, or if it was just part of a spell trap."

"A spell trap?"

"Something automatically attuned to certain intruders. I set several at home while you and Jimmy were gone tonight."

"And after you set them up, you can forget them?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. I wonder if people can be part of one..."

Angel pushed the bike into a shadow between low, squat pines, and returned to where Lilith stood on the dump road. She caught the rays of the moon in a huge, single shaft of crystal in her hands, one so pure that Angel could make out only the cleavage lines, the intersections between its mineral planes. The concentration bathed her face, seemed to act in medicinal ways as it made a tonic of celestial light. She used the crystal like a compass, and it pointed toward the back of the dump. The fire he'd seen from the road sputtered toward the back acres of the dump sight, and Angel remembered the smoke in his visions, how it swirled about the pit above a mad girl holding a bloody heart.

"That's it."

Lilith didn't respond. She'd doubled over with a cramp in her side. He held her, trying to work the cramp out with massage. That was when an attacker stepped from the bushes and lunged for Angel's head.

Angel had heard the first crackle of underbrush when the man moved, for whatever invisibility had cloaked him there, it had been broken when he tried to narrow the space between them. Angel planted himself on the balls of his feet. Let Lilith shift her weight to stand on her own again. And began a roundhouse kick. When the man made the move for his neck it evaporated before him, replaced by the rising army boot on Angel's right foot. The blow rocked his attacker as it connected with the side of his skull, but the man didn't fall; a buoyant force upheld him. He caught a piece of Angel's

fatigue jacket, wrenching Angel's arm in a vicious tug. Angel's shoulder caught fire, and his vision blurred as he recognized a policeman's uniform. He continued through the spinning course of the roundhouse, eeling from the man's grip before it locked on him, and with his back exposed, Angel pushed all the momentum and power of his shoulders and upper body into a flying elbow. It caught the cop directly in the windpipe, lancing through the layers of muscle. It speared the Adam's apple with the sharpest point of the joint, and Angel heard it crunch under the blow as he continued around, his back exposed.

Curtis Boggs—Hugie's inside cover-up man—choked, then gasped for breath.

Though he should have been unconscious, or dead, Boggs lashed out with a desperation punch that grazed Angel along the side of his head and the occipital ridge. It was solid enough to send Angel reeling forward. When he straightened around, he could make out a ball of golden fire crackling to his right, a spell in Lilith's hand. Angel stepped sideways, avoided another swing, then kicked straight for the man's face. It flattened his nose, and the blow drove a sliver of nasal cartilage deep into Boggs's brain. He collapsed into a twitching heap. No matter how charged by The Presence, he couldn't avoid a bad case of cause and effect this time.

"Jesus, you didn't have to do that!"

"He was trying to kill us."

"He's a cop."

Angel held his head in his hands. He felt dizzy. All the self-confidence and sarcastic bravado had been drained from him. "He's the enemy. Hugie's forth man."

"But I'm on the opposite side. Killing isn't my method, it's theirs."

Just then a hand grabbed Angel's leg. The Presence still animated Boggs, though only in a feeble way. He kicked Boggs in the ribs. The air rushed from his lungs, and he collapsed.

"Then you shouldn't have enlisted me, damn it!" Angel shook his head clear of cobwebs and looked along the car

path ahead. He couldn't see a single detail beyond the vague auras of the landscape. He'd been thrown from sudden clarity to almost nothing. "Besides, you should save your energy. We no longer have the element of surprise."

Lilith nodded and let the spell in her hand dissolve. With it went the last of the visible light for Angel.

The world he entered was an anti-world, where darkness ruled not as a matter of course, nor as a result of day passing into night, but more and more as the normal, illumined world became negated, and the unseen became manifest as fields of energy. These aural fields surrounded all living things: the aquamarine lace that draped the pine trees about the edges of the dump, the wavy blue that sheathed the spears of grass, the green glow of mildew and algae feeding on trash, the orange of lichen. The most active belonged to the sea gulls, white twists that blinked in and out of view, defending their silhouetted kingdom of aerosol cans and torn trash bags. The most benign were the low level bacteria that impregnated the garbage decay within the soil and gave a pale outline to the curvatures in the landscape. The most entrancing was the coppery flow of Lilith's body as it moved further along the road into the dump piles.

"Lilith? Where are you going?"

"I've got to find them. I can't stay out much longer."

His gift was all that was left to him, that and Lilith. Angel followed her brilliant color as it oozed down the road. With mud weighting his boots, he moved slowly, careful not to trip on unseen tires or broken furniture, then across a small banking onto another branch of the roads that weaved through the dump. He caught up with her and supported her with his shoulder when she doubled up again with pain. They could hear sirens in the distance.

"I think the manor went up. We just thought it was the truck."

Lilith coughed from deep in her chest. "No, the manor hasn't blown. I'd sense that. Something must have gone wrong." More coughs racked her body. "But the truck fire will keep them close if we need help."

At the top of another rise, which looked down upon the faint swampy green of the back area, where the dump piles burned unattended, they found Jimmy's CJ-7 mired on its side in a depression filled with putrid ground water. Heat still outlined the hood and the front panels for Angel. Lilith saw it plainly.

"Oh shit. Oh, my god!"

Lilith tried to run, but the pains that rippled blue through her aura and about her sides and back slowed her to a hobble.

"Hurry, Angel. Please."

As they topped the next crest, flattened by bulldozers, they entered a Boschian landscape of smoldering energies where patches of decaying cardboard twisted in frozen effigies, and flames leapt above them like energy demons from the underworld of trash. On the edge of a trough scooped out against the perimeter bank of the landfill, a bonfire party looked in full swing. If the scene had been cast in visible light for him, and only the light of the fire had danced about the figures, Angel would have sworn they were on the beach. A volleyball net. A few blankets. The murmur of the surf. Only these few props were needed to transport this to normality, for the figures seemed to act in a normal way. The auras of trim boys looked into the feline masks of girls and laughed in vacuous admiration. One girl twirled something; Angel guessed a parasol. Another tipped back her head and took a long pull from a bottle, probably wine. A couple played sea chanteys on guitar. But this was a parody of gaiety. The summer people had been the focus for The Presence all along, now they were used as mere props in the staging of a larger scene, a scene that looked false and bizarre to him even beyond the extraordinary circumstances by which he viewed it. As he helped Lilith stagger through the glow of couples sitting in the dirt, Angel understood that the element of surprise was not just lost to them, but had been wholly beyond their reach. He felt sure that he and Lilith had been lured here to join the fun. Hugie knew they were coming all along.

"Jimmy," Lilith cried.

Jimmy lay face down, unmoving at the bottom of the pit.

The girl with the carving knife crackled in waves of brilliant saffron, rising through a brown aura where she stood over him and marked his back with fine slashes from its—Angel felt sure—obsidian tip. The blood welted on him in reddish alphabets. This was the girl who served The Presence. The towhead on the steamship, the boyish one who'd helped murder the woman on the beach and the ones in the pit. The kid mad from drugs and dying.

"Welcome," heralded a low-pitched utterance from the shadows to their right. "Welcome to our jungle."

Hugie's voice touched Angel's soul like a match igniting a fuse. Whether the events of their struggle had inexorably wound to a fever pitch, or if the close proximity of the opposing forces forced a violent reaction, as with chemicals agitated by a catalyst, Angel could not tell. Either way, the situation careened out of control from the moment Hugie spoke, the same moment that Lilith held her crystal in both hands to her forehead. He saw the tension there burn in her aura like a magnesium flare. Energy pulsed out and engulfed the girl with the knife, knocking her flat. Knocking an agonizing scream from her lungs. It also wrapped about them in a protective sheet, whirling in white bands of cold fire and spinning like the hyper-excited particles in a cyclotron. Two of the teenagers leapt at them from behind, and Angel twisted in the grip of the boy, their auras hot and slippery between them like layers of grease. His assailant grabbed him about the neck, drew him close until their features were outlined in swirling waves of energy. He battled Von Slater, not a zombie teenager; here was an adult with a honed racquetball build. Von Slater's face dissolved to black, grew dark tentacles that fed on Angel's aura and weakened it. He heard a voice in his head as the anti-light began to swallow him. It repeated something he'd heard before, something Curtis Boggs had said.

"Looks like you're in the wrong place at the right time. You're mine. You're mine, boy."

Angel shrugged him off. Von Slater jolted him with a fist to the stomach area. His attempt at a haymaker slipped off

Angel's shoulder, however, when a new and brighter light ignited between them. Lilith cried out, and Angel sensed that she drew on vast stores of power, perhaps channeled from the big crystal on Pine Street. The light about them contracted until it overwhelmed Angel, blocking out his now limited vision. He cocked his arm, drove ahead with his fist toward where Von Slater had stood and connected with a solid blow. He sensed the newspaper magnate trying to hit back. Then the energy waves consumed them wholly, wrapping around his skin and pressing at Angel's core, protecting him. He heard a bellow from a distant place and a lance of cold black passed near to his side. The light imploded, making him weak, causing him to drop to his knees.

Von Slater and a woman that had to be Dora Guildpole lay together in a heap, their auras pulsing faintly. They were alive, but drained of any potent force. Angel turned his head back, and saw that Jimmy's attacker remained immobile in the pit; Jimmy was no longer visible, his aura gone. Angel realized that his aura had been on the wane when they first spotted him. The young couples groped in the dirt about the pit, puppets with severed strings. Lilith sprawled a few meters to his left. Her aura glowed with health, though she seemed barely conscious, gripping her crystal with a limp wrist. Lilith had fought them off, and though she'd proved how much she cared for him, and for Jimmy, it cost her dearly. That left Angel to contend with Hugie, who now barreled towards him like a rhino with red vortexes for eyes. He carried a red snout of fire—the war club he'd used as a cane.

Hugie waved the club, sending black ripples through the air, and Angel saw that this lightless energy permeated Hugie, making his aura show suddenly as a distortion in darkness. Raising himself to one knee, Angel feigned disorientation, feeling around in the dirt for stability with his hands. His fist closed around the haft of Lilith's crystal, and he eased it from her fingertips. He staggered up. Hugie stopped, cocked the shimmering club to the side and prepared to swing at Angel's head as if it were a baseball. But Angel wasn't before him. He'd fallen forward into a clean

tumble between the rippling columns of energy that were Hugie's legs, and he straightened up to stab the point of quartz he held into the emptiness around the shaft of the war club. He connected with the back of Hugie's meaty hand.

All she feels is the hand at her throat. His hand that twitches.

The club flew from his grip and flipped end-over-end into the pit.

The big man cried out, his voice strangling, twisting to a whine that hurt Angel's ears.

Angel put all his weight and force into a driving shoulder that toppled the big man and left him hanging on the pit's edge, clawing for a handhold.

Hugie screamed at Angel. The scream hit him like a hammer, making his head go totally blank. He screamed again, and the sound raveled into a great black bird that descended about Angel, battering through his aura with black wings and raking his mind with cold talons of jet. Angel remembered what Lilith said about his personal magic, that it countered black magic. He focused his pain and anger into a burning spear in his head; drove it home between the bird's groping claws. It disintegrated, and Angel imagined his own aura brightening, quickening to heal the woundless yet serious scars he'd suffered, but Hugie screamed again, and it mushroomed into a sooty cloud that shattered and left tattered remains clinging to Angel's aura like ashes, weighting him down. More blackness rained on him, rendering him immobile. He felt his own aura dim as darkness engulfed him. He dropped to all fours, scraping himself on a small battered file cabinet; and he heard Hugie laugh at his weakness, a taunt augmented as if through a microphone. Only it was the microphone of The Presence, *Hugie* was the microphone of The Presence. It had been their mistake to believe that the force still resided in the club, that it needed the ancient artifact for anything more than ritual effect. It used Hugie now, and Hugie had used it in his voice to cancel Lilith's power. He used it to stop Angel. The big man spoke in his head, repeating a phrase Angel had heard him yell near the barn in the pasture, and it sounded like the squeal of a

train applying its breaks.

"You can't fight us."

Angel moved his leaden arms and gripped his hands about his skull, blocking his ears. It only amplified the sound.

"You can't fight us."

"We took out Boggs," he said into the dark void. "And Von Slater and Dora. I can fight."

"Did you think the crystal under my bus would fool us? That anything could? We have you. You are consumed. Consumed."

Like hell, he thought. He could discern fine red pupils where Hugie hung at the edge of the pit, and he concentrated on their light. He cracked through the dark crust that confined him using a willful surge of muscle, pushed himself up using the file cabinet as a crutch, then hefted it and tossed it upon Hugie in one fluid motion. The man let rip a scream as he fell from the blow, but not one that transformed into a weapon. It was a scream of despair. Hugie landed hard below, cutting the sound short.

Later, when Angel's head quieted to a mere pounding throb, and he could see something beyond the spots spinning before him in a mandala, he stood at the edge of the pit and looked down. Hugie had impaled his backbone along the row of obsidian points that protruded from his club, and in doing so had severed his nerve centers. What had happened after that was unthinkable, for what was left looked like a carcass left to weeks of baking sun and ravenous vultures. The man had self-destructed, or actually The Presence had, for by feeding on Hugie, it had consumed itself. There was hardly enough left for the flies.

And yet it stood, the club keeping its back stiff from behind.

Moving its crusted bones, its unhinged rib cage flexing like the legs of a centipede, it scabbled up the dirt toward the lip in a blind rush at Angel, and ahead of it—rolling like the pressure wave before a rocket—a memory pushed at him. Not his memory. But the combined memories of all those that drowned in the tour bus that Hugie sent off the wharf. It

cleaved into his head like an axe.

did you know they found a body washed up out at 'Sconset...

Flash. Faces with bulging eyes and twisted mouths that gulped water instead of air. Hands clawing at windows, at other people, at their own distended jaws.

welcome to our jungle...

Flash. The image shook him to the core, but he'd been shaken before when the explosion at Uxmal had knocked him out and buried him in debris. Angel fought back with his own remembrances. Uxmal under a full moon. They'd marched across the limestone tableland of the Yucatan peninsula in an oppressive heat and reached the great ruin at twilight when the bats gathered to chase insects above the buildings. The facade of the biggest was etched in a silvery relief. Patterned squares and broken figurines above the cornice stood out like proofs of the superstitious theories of local Indios. The ruin seemed to be cast from one section of bedrock, unalterable by man, and despite its caved-in sections and the masses of rude stone—if not because of them—it appeared to be the malevolent effigy of a lost millennium, an age ruled by chaos. That had been his first inkling of the bad years that lay ahead, back then, when the war planted its claws of fear into his heart. Without fail, he also traveled back to that fateful day in Central American.

hey, you....Angel

Flash. He remembered the siege of Uxmal as daybreak awoke the toucans and set the monkeys to chattering. He'd been the first to pump M-60 tracer fire into the enemy positions, the first to sense an attack from their encampment. The ruins erupted with orange spumes of fire. Huge blocks of carved stone fountained over the clearing and rained down upon their positions. The surviving Mexs overran the surviving GIs. Gripped by a total, all-consuming hysteria—a fear of every movement, every shift of light, every beat of an insect's wing—he'd stood and fired his rifle until the barrel overheated and jammed. He'd known then that he would never see the world with the same eyes as before. Call it magic, for there was that. Call it emotional change. Call it paranoia. It had

taken four of his buddies to hold him down and one to slap him silly before he relaxed in its grip. He'd stood and fired and fired and gave it his all.

help me, please don't... a girl's voice

Flash. Angel knew now how to summon manic energy. He let this killing rage pour out of him. All the angry feelings about Jimmy's murder. About the other victims. And the war. And the used and twisted little girl down in the pit. Those people the world had fucked over.

I'm drowning...drowning... Lilith's voice, fading.

Flash. He jumped down into the pit, let rage buoy him up on his feet, motivate him. But The Presence flooded his head with ink.

You're mine, boy.

Flash. The ink spread until a cerebral movie ratcheted before him and sped up until the scene was recognizable. All too familiar, and something that he feared had happened when he first saw Jimmy immobile in the pit. The Presence threw its worst nightmare at him. Flash. Flash.

Jimmy tried to move his body, tried to sit up, but he felt as if cold lead pumped through his body, not blood. His sense of the world pulsed with the slow heartbeat in the vein on his neck. He rolled on his side.

The girl was there. She was squatting. Waiting. Laughing in her eyes as she howled through her throat.

Jimmy saw what she squatted beside. Thick plate glass. Row upon row of tapered glass shards sticking up from the soil of the dump. Placed like punji sticks. She touched a sharp one with her fingertip, gently, and howled again.

The girl helped Jimmy to stand, and Jimmy obliged. His only chance was to gain his feet and run. To run into the shadows. His only chance, yet his own folly. He couldn't run. The drugs froze him. She led him like a drunken bear. Made him stand before her work, made him admire it like some creation of horseshit environmental art. She stood behind him, gave him a shove. Not hard, but hard enough. Shit. The earth sped up to impale him. Shit. One shard in the throat.

Ten through his tee shirt and into the gut. All along his arms, his legs. Pincered in his groin. A miracle, none in the area of heart.

Then one shard in his left eye—an obsidian point—that seemed to drive forever toward the searing searing furnace of his brain. Fire. Then fire winking out as she carved his back in ciphers.

Angel felt gripped by a severe case of the shakes, a spell that made his muscles go rigid and sent him to his knees, but the rage still gathered. Angel fused all his white magic with it, everything accrued from the war and years of crazed experience. He threw a spell out in an unfocused mass at the thing as it clawed at the trash that supported Angel. Not knowing what form it might take. Knowing only the anger and despair over Jimmy that sheathed it like a shell casing.

“Suck on this, asshole.”

The ground under Hugie began to explode, shifting with fractures and mounding into small piles. The hand of a skeleton—infused with glowing bacteria—popped through one, the heads of others through several more piles like mushroom buttons. A host of Hugie’s buried victims from the killing grounds raised up, as the man had just raised their images in the drowning scene against him. They brushed past Angel. They staggered out from the soil in the pit, clutching the stubs of Hugie’s legs, gripping the club impaled in his back, beckoning him to join them in their decay, as he’d already joined them in spirit. Hugie screamed until his voice cracked. Angel fell onto his face, holding his ears. Many of the corpses caught fire, along with the mounds of trash they rose through, yet that added to Hugie’s problem.

“My people...”

Hugie collapsed backward under their sputtering, cleansing touch, his tattered tuxedo aflame. The cane burned with him, smoking in gouts of carbon.

7

Angel regained consciousness with a flood of strength. He felt empowered by victory and the adrenalin of survival.

Lilith was another matter. She staggered weakly up into his arms when he approached her, her face older, though not greatly so—she still could turn a man's head. She'd come to terms with her aging while trapped in the night, beyond the influence of her healing crystals. Or else she'd been recharged again by the weakening and dissolution and final destruction of The Presence. They made quite a pair: one blind and one half crippled by the debilities of a centenarian; but these wouldn't amount to much in the long run, if they made it to the long run. Angel lifted her into his arms, knowing that he'd leave Jimmy behind despite Lilith's need to touch him, to cry over him. He'd leave despite all the questions that would come later from the police, and the reporters. He trod past the young couples about the pit that brushed each other off and shouted at each other about the spreading flames, uncomprehending. In the darkness beyond, fire engines drew to a stop with their piercing sirens. He ignored the men bustling about with hoses and breathy inquiries. Walked by Officer Coffin. Doing what was best for Lilith. Walking away from it all, at last. Heading home.

She squeezed Angel as if in agreement, and then squeezed him further, in thanks for all the small miracles of that night. When Angel squeezed back, he felt the presence of a greater aura that surrounded them, welded them into a couple; and it seemed to offer some protection from the ravages of ma-

nipulation and doubt and war and evil, and, most of all, from time. He carried her from the pillars of flame that licked against the constellations above, and he kissed her forehead, as if to say, "We made it, and made it matter."

Lilith shifted her head towards him. "Where are we going?"

"Far from here. Can you ride on the motorcycle?"

She ignored his question. "What about Jimmy?"

"Jimmy's gone. You know that."

She started to cry, to let all her emotions unravel and play themselves out. She fought him, wanting to turn back. Her fist beat at his shoulder. He stopped and held her close, leaned against a dead pine by the side of the access road. A police car with a blue flashing lights mounted in the roof bar slipped past. A cold wind seemed to follow it.

"We can't leave him, Angel. We can't."

"Nothing we can do," Angel said. "Moving him isn't possible. Not without several people, and they're taking care of that right now."

"I owe it to him. I do."

Angel held her at arm's length, brushed away the hair that danced in her face.

"You don't want to see it. You don't need that. It's over."

The wind continued to blow cool and clean-smelling from beyond the entrance to the dump, a harbinger of changes in the weather. The seasonal inhabitants were free to leave, and now autumn would come to Nantucket, to Angel and Lilith and the house on Pine Street. Come to the winter people who'd owned and ruled the island—for better or worse—all along.

NOMANS LAND

by Lucius Shepard

1

Four miles due south of the Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard lies Nomans Land, an island measuring one mile wide and a mile and a half in length, rising from sand dunes tufted with rank grasses and beach rose on its eastern shore to a cliff of clay and various other sedimentary materials some thirty feet high that faces west toward the Massachusetts coast. Prior to 1940 the island was the site of several small farms, but during World War II when German submarines began to be sighted along the coastline, the government confiscated the land, removed the inhabitants and erected large concrete bunkers on the beaches from which military observers scanned the sea by day and night for enemy periscopes and conning towers. Following the war, the island was ruled off-limits to civilians and utilized as a

target area for bombers and fighters stationed at Otis Air Force Base, a practice that continues, albeit sporadically, to this very day; on winter nights when the din of the tourist season has passed, it is possible to hear the rocket bursts as far away as the island of Nantucket some twenty-five miles to the east. Yet in spite of this, thousands upon thousands of gulls and terns and a lesser number of old squaw ducks—often seen flying in peppery strings against the sunsets—have chosen the island for their nesting place, and as a result it has been designated a National Wildlife Preserve. It may seem peculiar that a wildlife preserve should be subjected to bombing runs and rocket fire; however, the point has been made—and to many conservationists it is a point well taken—that these intermittent attacks do less harm to the avian populace than would the influx of human beings (no matter how high-minded their intentions) that would occur should the island's restricted military status be voided. And so Nomans Land remains isolate, its silence broken only by wind and surf, the mewing of gulls, the occasional barking of seals at sport on the beaches, and the inconsequential noises of the moles and other rodents that tunnel through its soil. All except the newest bomb craters have been filled in with grass and sand, but walking is a difficult chore because much of the land is dimpled rather like the surface of an enormous golf ball, and it is easy to make a mis-step. Scrub pine covers most of the island, hiding all but the tallest ribs of the splintered farm buildings, and the sight of these ruins in conjunction with the lonely cries of the birds, the evidences of war and warlike activity, gives the place an air of desolation wholly in concert with its name. And as to that name...could there be some profound significance to the running together of the words "no" and "man," to the lack of an apostrophe implying possession? Or is this merely due to the carelessness of a clerk or a mapmaker? And even if it is such, does the inadvertency of the nomenclature reflect an unconscious knowledge of uncommon process or event? There are no evil rumors associated with the island, no legends, no sailors' lies about strange lights or wild musics

issuing from that forlorn shore. But a lack of legend and rumor in these legended waters, where every minor shoal is the subject of a dozen supernatural tales, seems in itself reason for suspicion, for wonderment; and perhaps a more compelling reason yet for suspicion lies in the fact that despite the island's curious past, despite the penchant among New Englanders for collecting and transcribing local histories, not one has come forward to ask the many questions that might well be asked concerning Nomans Land, and no human voice exists to give the answers tongue.

2

On the night of October 16, 198-, during the worst storm of the season, the fishing trawler *Preciosilla*, with its engines dead and wheelhouse afire, was swept through the Muskeget Channel between Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, then westward in heavy seas toward Nomans Land. Four of the ten-man crew had been lost in the explosion that had ripped apart the engines, and three more had been washed overboard. As the vessel drew near Nomans Land, the survivors caught sight of the island silhouetted in a lightning stroke against churning clouds, and knowing that the *Preciosilla* could not long stay afloat, they committed their souls to God and their bodies to the sea in an attempt to reach solid ground. One of the three, Pedro Arenal, a Portuguese man of New Bedford, was carried by the tidal rip past the island and never seen again. However, the remaining two, Odiberto "Bert" Cisneros, age forty-six, also Portuguese, and the ship's cook, Jack Tyrell, an Irishman just entering his thirtieth year, reached shore within fifty feet of one another and took shelter in the lee of a concrete bunker, where they sat shivering, too cold and shaken to think, stunned by the thunderous concussions, gazing out at the toiling darkness, at detonations of lightning that illuminated waves peaking higher than circus tents and plumed with phosphorescent sprays.

It was Tyrell, a thin, black-haired man with a sly cast to his sharp features, who had the urge to move inside the bunker, feeling the cold more intensely than Cisneros, who was the

better insulated of the pair, being muscular and bandy-legged, with the beginnings of a pot belly, a seamed, swarthy face, and—at the moment—a terrified grimace punctuated by two gold canines. He gave no sign of hearing Tyrell's shouts, and at last Tyrell came to his feet, staggering with the wind, his hair flying, and took hold of Cisneros under his arms. Cisneros let himself be hauled erect, but when he realized that Tyrell was trying to wrestle him inside the bunker, he tore loose from the Irishman's grasp and went stumbling farther down the slope of the dune. To his eyes the bunker, with its pale cement bulk and black slit mouth, had the look of an immense jawbone from which the demented howling of the wind was issuing, and he wanted no part of it. A powerful gust buffeted him, driving him backward, his eyes rolling up toward the sky in time to spot a flash of amber radiance and the sweep of the beam from the Gay Head light across the bottoms of the racing clouds. Though he had sailed those waters for twenty years, in his panic he had no recollection of the lighthouse, and the blade of light seemed a portent from Hell. He dropped to his knees in the mucky sand and crossed himself, deeper into fear than ever before, shreds of prayers running through his head like tattered distress flags.

Tyrell was tempted to leave him. He had no great love for the Portuguese, none whatsoever for Cisneros, who had twice menaced him with a knife aboard the *Preciosilla*. But their ordeal had welded something of a bond between them, and besides, Cisneros' fear acted to shore Tyrell up. "Damn your ass!" he shouted, fighting through the wind to Cisneros' side. "You stupid piece of shit! Do you want to freeze...is that it?" Once again he grappled with Cisneros, hauled him up and began dragging him toward the bunker.

His brush with prayer had left Cisneros resigned to fate. What did it matter how he died, whether blown into the sea or crushed in the jaws of the bunker? At the last moment, as Tyrell pushed him in over the cement lip and into the black maw, his fatalistic resolve eroded and he tried to break free; but strength had drained from his limbs and he toppled in

onto the floor. Tyrell crawled in after him, and they huddled together close to the wall. Lightning flashes strobed the interior of the bunker, revealing pocked walls streaked with whitish bird droppings, matted with cobwebs, and more cobwebs spanned the angles of the corners, billowing and tearing loose in the wind. Cisneros shut his eyes, preferring blindness to flickering glimpses of what seemed to him redolent of dungeons and torture chambers. He began to mutter the Stations of the Cross, repeating those consoling words until they had insulated him against the fierce battering of the storm, and before long, shrinking like a child from a confrontation with his fears, he sank into a deep sleep.

Tyrell, too, was afraid, but his fear derived not from the storm or the island, but from the past few hours aboard the *Preciosilla*. He stared into the darkness, seeing there the faces of the dead, the burning wheelhouse pitching like a great mad window inset into the darkness, with the blackened, shriveling figure of the captain erect amid the flames, still clutching the wheel, and the mate, his eyes slits of reflected fire, throwing up his arms like a benighted Christian to welcome the huge talon of ebony water that had plucked him up and borne him down to Hell...Tyrell shook his head, trying to clear it of those nightmarish images. He peeled away his slicker and rubbed at a cramp in his thigh. A shudder passed through his chest and limbs, seeming to liberate all the damned-up weakness inside him, and he leaned back, resting his head against the wall, feeling distant from the storm, from all that had gone before.

What a bloody mess! he thought.

Still and all, he'd been in worse spots, he had. He was a survivor, and he had survivor's luck. Take the time he, Joe McIlrane, and Pepper Swayze had been trapped by the Brits at Pepper's house, with only one rifle and a hail of bullets shattering vases and pictures on the wall. And then prison. God, hadn't that been a stroke of fortune, to be stuck in the same cell as the best damn break-out artist in the IRA? And that same luck had been at work for him in fleeing Ireland, in making it to the States and the sweet life, with a nice girl

and a clean bed and plenty of time for the muckle part and having a few beers in the evening. Of course sooner or later he was bound to take up the struggle again. He couldn't be letting others have all the glory of driving the goddamn Brits back to their gloomy little bloat of a kingdom...A violent burst of lightning split open the black moil of the storm, burning afterimages of the bunker walls on Tyrell's eyes, and he let out a squawk.

"Jesus!" he said to the sky. "Are you wanting to kill me?"

Thunder grumbled, the sea boomed.

"Well, fuck you, then."

He tried to force his thoughts back to Ireland, but found that his memories—that was how he related to the lies he'd told so often, as fond, brave memories, inhabiting them with more frequency than he did his actual past—he found that they had ceased to be a comfort. He wondered how much longer the storm would last. Probably no less than a day. Afterward he'd build a fire on the north shore, big enough so they'd notice the smoke at Gay Head. It was for certain *he'd* have to do whatever was necessary, because Cisneros wasn't going to be any help. The bastard had been all nails and sharp edges with a deck beneath him, but just tip him over, give him a shake, and he wasn't worth spit. Well, old Bert was a fortunate soul this night, for he had as companion the Scourge of Belfast, one Jack Tyrell, who never yet had been known to let a brother-in-arms fall untended by the way.

"Easy there, old son," he said, patting Cisneros' shoulder. "I'm ever with you, don't you know."

Bert Cisneros moaned, the world cracked and dazzled, and Jack Tyrell, who once had laughed in the face of the firing squad of dreams, laughed now, believing there was no terror in the entire universe that could withstand the arsenal of his imagination.

3

Cisneros did not so much sleep as fall down the staircase of his forty-six years, tumbling slowly head over heels, bumping and rolling across the landings, taking long enough at each to register its consequential evils. The man he'd knifed when they'd put into Nantucket during a nor'easter; the friends he'd cheated; the women he'd beaten. He saw his wife, her face purpled and lumped with bruises, tear-stained, clutching the little gold cross that hung from her neck, and for the first time he felt shame. His was a foul dark slant of a life, an inch of time fractioned by violent stupidities, energized by an ego convinced—despite all the evidence against—of its mental superiority, and looking at it in this wan light, he had a sense of relief on passing the final landing and plummeting back to where he had begun, lying curled like a dark pearl in the mouth of a giant oyster, not asleep, but somnolent. He could see the whole island, see it from alternating perspectives and through a lens of perception that transformed each sight into a strange jeweled design upon a black ground: birds with ruby eyes tucked in among the dune grass, which showed as waving silvery cilia, and ghostly pale clouds eddying above, and the shattered timbers of an old ruin edged with an unholy shimmering of green fire amid the winded pines, and jade blue waves marbled with an iridescent circuitry of foam that broke over a cliff to the west, and the wind a whirling gray-green fog. He wondered how he could be lying in the bunker and yet appear to be hovering above different quarters of the island,

and then he noticed the thousands of golden wires extending from his body, each connected to some point on the island. It was through these wires, he realized, that his senses were being channeled, allowing him to overlook the place, to inspect every detail. He heard a voice...no, two voices. One was muffled, agitated, calling him back to the darkness of life, and he resisted it, listening instead to the second voice, which was soft—more a musical sonority than actual speech—and transmitted a feeling of tranquillity and power similar to that he'd experienced as a child when kneeling in church: a feeling he associated with God. He didn't believe that the god speaking to him was the god of his childhood, but he was gratified that his prayers had reached someone's ears, and since to his mind one god was much like another, he had no moral problem with the transference of faith. And when his thoughts began to change, becoming oddly angular and literate, full of grim resolve, when he began to think of himself not as Bert Cisneros but as Quentin Norcross, to see himself as a tall pale man with hawkish features and deep-set eyes shaded by tufted eyebrows, dressed in his Sunday suit of black broadcloth, he did not question this, knowing that God's ways were not his to understand, and surrendered to those thoughts...

...and found himself walking in a high blue day with mackerel clouds far out to sea, planting each step firmly, squarely, as if intending to leave a clear track. When he reached the edge of the western cliff he took a stand in the knee-deep grass, leaned forward and peered down at the cliff face. With its fissured gray surface, it had the look of an ancient decaying forehead rising from the sea, grooved by harrowing thoughts. The cauldron of waves at its base seemed to pull at him, to lodge a knot of their chill tonnage in his stomach, and he straightened, fixed his eyes on the sunstruck sea, on cobalt swells flowing away to the horizon. He thought it peculiar that he had no pain. It had been the pain gnawing at his intestines that had brought him to this point, and now, as if his decision had proved a cure, he felt calm, translucent, free of affliction. If it had been only that,

only pain, he would have seen it to the end; but he could no longer stomach the sight of his illness etching new lines on Martha's face, disfiguring her as hideously as the sea had disfigured the cliff. This was the best way, the moral way. She would never believe him a suicide; she would assume that he had been walking by the cliff, suffered a spasm and lost his footing. She'd have the money from the land, and she was still pretty enough to find a new husband, a new father for the children. Blessedly they were too young to feel the true sting of grief. Oh, they would weep and think of him in Heaven. But time would heal those wounds, and all that he could do for them now was to hasten their healing by dying swiftly. And that would not be as difficult as he'd thought. He was dead already, killed by the force of his commitment. Standing there, he felt walled off from the past, from life, and he thought he could feel the entire island at his back. The cove on the eastern shore where urchins clung to the rocks of a tide pool; the beachvine fettering the north slope, its complex shadows trembling in the breeze; a vole peeking from its tunnel, its black eyes starred like Indian sapphires; the white spiders—unique to the island—that annoyed him with their incessant biting, but wove webs of unsurpassed intricacy among the pines; the terns wheeling and wheeling above the deep. He felt them all summed up in a unity of tension, as if they were a power that stood beside him, joining him in what must be done. He was not a religious man. His pragmatic nature had not allowed him to accept the existence of a hereafter, and he could not accept that possibility now. However, he believed that if there was a god it would be—like the island—an isolate thing capable of absorbing the lesser quantities that came within its sphere, assimilating winds that had touched the tops of Balinese temples and tides that swept past the shores of Tenerife. In a sense the island *had* been his god, the object of his devotion, his labors and hopes, and he felt closer to it now than ever before. He loved the old place, and perhaps that, not some mystical abstraction, was the definition of a god: something labored over and nourished, a thing that through long process of devotion became indis-

tinguishable from its devotee. It seemed his thoughts were being orchestrated by the crashing of the waves and the screams of the gulls into a kind of music, a flight of logic and poetry, and he realized then that he had stepped forward, that he was falling. He had an instant of fear, but the shock of impact, the stinging cold of the water, numbed his fear, and he went pinwheeling down in blue-green light, icy light, icy dark, slowly, slowly, into a dream of a storm, into a secret place where others shared the dream, and no man lived, and truth was form, and form was chaos, and chaos was ordered anew.

4

Morning, and the storm held over Nomans Land. Slate-gray waves piled in onto the beach, eroding the beach; the clouds blackened and lowered, and the wind flattened the dune grass, keening across the island, driving slants of rain into the mouth of the bunker, stinging Tyrell awake. All his muscles ached, and there was grit in his mouth. He groaned, rubbed a cramp from his thigh, scratched an inflamed spot on his wrist and noticed Cisneros still curled up asleep, his neck and head turtled beneath his slicker, several cobwebs spanning between his legs and the wall. Tyrell hawked, spat and said, "Hey, Bert! Rise and shine, you filthy spic!"

Cisneros didn't move.

Tyrell reached out, gave his shoulder a nudge, and Cisneros mumbled, but remained asleep.

"Worthless bastard," said Tyrell. "I'm better off without you, anyway. Plucking at your damned rosary and complaining to the saints like an old woman! To hell with you!"

He sucked at the scummy coating on his teeth, glancing around at the bunker. Cobwebs everywhere fettering the pale yellow stone, with dozens of white spiders creeping along the skeins, some suspended like tiny stars on single threads. He felt itchy movement on his calf, let out a squawk and crushed a spider that had climbed up under his jeans. He staggered to his feet, his flesh crawling, and began stamping on spiders that tried to scuttle away into the dark corners. When he was certain that the floor was clear, he stood shivering, hugging himself against the cold and keeping an eye

cocked for any spider that might lower from the ceiling.

"Cisneros," he said shakily. "Wake up."

The sleeping man appeared to shudder.

"You want these dancey little fuckers traipsing all over you?" he said, cheered by the sound of his voice. "Fine then, Bert. That's just fine with me, old son. For myself, I've fucking had it. My stomach's empty as a country church on Tuesday midnight, and I'm going to find me an oyster or a dead bird or some damn thing to fill it." He climbed half-out of the bunker mouth, sat perched on the lip, turning up the collar of his slicker. "Can I bring back something for you, Bert? No? Well, maybe you'll feel differently after your nap. I'll be checking in on you. Sleep tight, now."

He swung his legs over the lip, sank to his ankles in the sand, then slogged up the face of the dune, stumbling, crawling on all fours to the crest. He got to his feet again, struck full by the wind and the slashing rain, and stared out across a broken ground: tufts of pale green grass sprouting from bowl-shaped depressions, some of them twenty feet wide, and beyond, where the land flattened out, stands of Japanese pine through which he could make out a fresh crater about a hundred feet off. Rising above the pines, near the center of the island, were spears of dark wood, obviously ruins. He started toward them, and something big and dirty white in color flew up from the grass, screeching, its wings flurrying at him, black beak punching the air in front of his face; he shrieked, threw up his arms, swung his fists, fell and went rolling down the dune.

He came to his knees at the bottom of the dune and looked around for the bird. A tern, it had been...he was pretty sure. It was nowhere in sight. He must, he realized, have come too near its nest, and he wondered if there were any eggs. Last resort, he thought. Last fucking resort. For one thing, raw eggs were low on his list, and for another, he wasn't eager to tangle with the tern again. He stood, brushed clots of wet sand from his jeans and set off for the ruins, picking his way among the overgrown craters. The air in the pines was shaded to a greenish gloom, with raindrops beaded like

translucent pearls on the tips of the needles; the ground was less broken here, but cobwebs were everywhere—the webs of white spiders like those that had infested the bunker. He tore them away, clearing a path, and after few minutes' walk emerged from sparse cover into a large clearing centered by the ruins. From the spacing of the standing timbers, the shingles lying amidst the other wreckage, he decided that they must have been part of a barn. And that mass of shattered boards to the right, smashed flat as if by a gigantic fist, that had likely been the main house. He walked over to the ruins, prodded the wreckage with his toe. Glistening dark planks with white brocades of mold, weeds poking up between their overlaps; shredded pieces of tin. He'd been hoping he might find an old store of canned food, but it was apparent there was nothing left that would do him any good.

The clouds frayed overhead, rips of ashen sky showing through for an instant, the rain diminishing; but then they closed in again, lowering, thick slabs of blackish gray like fleshy dead leaves matted together, and the wind gusted in a mournful rush, bending the pines all to one side, then letting them snap back to upright, like a line of tattered green dancers. Tyrell turned, unsure of what course to follow, wondering if he could knock off one of the birds with a stone, and could have sworn he saw someone standing at the edge of the clearing. Someone slender, wearing a hooded black slicker. His heart stuttered, he took a backward step. Then he understood that what he must have seen had been no more than a roughly human shape formed by an artful combination of shadows and the actions of the wind and the textures of discolored needles in a niche between two of the pines. However, a moment later he heard movement, and this time he caught a glimpse of a figure slipping behind a pine trunk.

"Is that you, Bert!" he called anxiously, and when there was no response, he called again. "Who's there?"

The rain picked up, spattering off the splintered planks at his feet, blurring his view of the pines, seeming to measure the passage of seconds with the oscillating hiss of drops seething in the pine boughs.

"Hey!" Tyrell shouted. "Hey, who the hell are you?"

Again there was no response, and, unnerved, imagining the presence of a madman or worse, he was about to head back to the bunker, when the figure moved out into the clearing and came toward him with a faltering step. A woman. Strands of whitish blond hair plastered to her forehead. In her late twenties, or maybe a bit younger. She had Nordic features, glacial blue eyes, a strong chin and mouth—a face that, while not beautiful, had a kind of imposing sensuality. She stopped a couple of feet away, fixing him with a look that seemed both hopeful and cautious, and made an incompleted gesture with her hand that made him think she had wanted to touch him. "You're from the boat," she said.

"How do you know that?" asked Tyrell, taken aback.

"I saw it burning last night." She pushed some stray blond hairs back beneath the hood of the slicker; a raindrop slid down her cheek to her chin. "I tried to get down to the beach, but the storm was too fierce. I lost my way. This morning I went to the bunker. I knew if anyone had survived, they'd take shelter there." She wiped rain from her face with the back of her hand. "Your friend's still asleep."

"Is he, now? Well, he had a hard night." Tyrell blinked at a drop that had trickled into the corner of his right eye. "My name's Jack Tyrell."

"Astrid." She pronounced the name tentatively as if hesitant about identifying herself.

Entrusted with her name, he felt suddenly assured, masterful and in control, solicitous of the weaker sex.

"And just what are you doing here, Astrid?" he asked in an expansive tone.

"I was...studying. The spiders...the white ones. You must have seen them. I'm an entomologist."

"Bugs, is it?"

"Yes, I...I was supposed to be picked up, but the storm...the boat couldn't get out. My friends...they'll be here once it lets up."

Tyrell could understand her temerity—a woman alone in this godforsaken place; but he sensed that her hesitancy was

the product of something more than a simple fear of assault, that she was in the grip of some profound uncertainty.

"Maybe," he suggested, "we should go back to the bunker. Get out of the rain."

"No," she said, glancing behind her, to the side, then fixing Tyrell with a wide-eyed stare. "No, I've got a place. It's... closer. And there's food if you're hungry."

"God, yes! I'd be eternally grateful for anything you can spare." He flashed her his most winning smile, but it didn't brighten her; she kept darting glances in all directions as if to reassure herself that everything was as usual. He noticed the swell of her breasts beneath the slicker, the flare of her hips, and felt a pang of desire that—with a dose of Catholic guilt, chiding himself for such lustful thoughts—he put from mind. Besides, he told himself, her friends would be coming. Now if *she* wanted to get friendly... well, that was another story.

"There's no reason to be frightened," he said. "I won't harm you. Now Bert...that's my mate. He's a different matter. Beats his wife, he does. And carries a knife." He laughed. "And in spite of that, in spite of being ignorant as sin, the sod thinks he's a bloody genius. Yeah, you best watch yourself with him about. He a menace even to himself. But I'll keep him in line, never you worry."

Her expression flowed between confusion and astonishment, and then those emotions resolved into a mournful laugh. "Oh, I'm not worried," she said. "I know there's nothing to fear."

5

Cisneros slept on, slipping from dream to dream, dreams that would have amazed him with their bizarre materials under any other circumstance, but which he had come to recognize as part of an intricate and consequential process that was most natural in its incidence, the underpinnings of creation itself. All life, he understood, was a dream. This was something his mother had told him when he was a child, and he had accepted it as a child's truth, the idea that one's days were but a fleeting image upon the mirrored pool of God's imagination; he doubted that his mother had seen it as other than a pleasant fairy tale. Now he realized that it was the ultimate truth. Life and dreams were, indeed, one and the same, and he had been fortunate enough by virtue of fatigue and terror to dive deeply enough beneath the surface of sleep so as to reach the source of dreams, the place from which life derived its impulse and meaning.

Millions upon millions of lives, of dreams, flowed to him along the golden skeins that held him fast, but with a connoisseur's selectivity he chose to inhabit only those who had been involved in some way with the island: Indians, farmers, soldiers, civilian observers, and those who, like him, had come there by chance. He dreamed that he was a boy playing atop the cliff, dropping stones into the boil of water at its base, lying on his back with the grasses tickling his nose, watching clouds so big and white and fat, they might have been famous souls. Then a young woman come with a man from Gay Head to take him as her first lover—he lin-

gered in that dream, deriving prurient delight from her tremulousness, her pain and pleasure. Then a mad submarine commander who had been stranded by his crew and thought his craft was gilded with baroque ornamentation like something out of Jules Verne, that it was armed with crystalline torpedoes containing drugs and music, and believed that he had sailed in secret waters wherein he and his crew visited lost continents and sported with sea-green women and were borne to ecstasies of sensibility by the verses of rhapsodes with beards of kelp and black pearls beneath their tongues.

These dreams were more complicated than the others in aspect and particularly in their use in playing the game of the world. Compared to the rest, they were like rooks and bishops in relation to pawns...for an instant he didn't understand where he had gotten that image. He had never played chess, had no familiarity with the pieces or the moves. But then he realized that, informed by the dreams, he was becoming a new man. All the evil compulsions of his former life were falling away like an old skin; his petty lusts and avarice, all the intemperate qualities of his nature were gradually being subsumed by a contemplative, sensitive character whose parameters were dictated by the contagious sweetness of more civilized souls, and he began to see that there was purpose to this change, that not by accident had he been led to Nomans Land. He was to provide a new turn in the affairs of God, to implement a new conceit. This knowledge dispelled the remnants of his fear, and he gave himself over utterly to the usages of the dreams, eager now to learn not only what deeds he must perform, but at whose agency he was to perform them. He felt that he was dwindling, growing insubstantial, becoming merely another dream, and rather than allowing this to unman him, he experienced an intoxicating joy in the act of surrender, in the sense of unity that pervaded him, in the understanding that despite all his human frailty and faults, his sense of destiny and special purpose was soon to be fulfilled, his sins had been forgiven, and he had been chosen to know the lineaments of his God.

6

Set back from the ruins of the old farm, half-hidden in the grayish green shade of the pines, was a small shack with a tin roof...probably a tool shed that somehow had survived the years of rockets and foul weather. Its weathered boards were black with dampness, and the roof was half rust, but Astrid had done a good job in making a home of the place. A hot plate— battery-operated, with two burners—and a hurricane lamp were set on a rickety table, and beside them lay a litter of scientific equipment: microscope, test tubes, and so forth. The floor was covered with a carpet of dry grasses, and a supply of canned food was stacked along one wall; the gaps in the boards had been sealed with mud, and a sleeping bag was spread in the corner, with a couple of blankets folded atop it. After a few minutes, with the lamp giving off an unsteady orange glow and the hotplate heating the little space, warming cans of stew, the shack took on a cheery air; the sounds of the wind and rain seemed unimportant and faraway. Only the cobwebs spanning the rafters struck a contrary note, and when Tyrell, thinking they might be too high for Astrid to reach, asked if she wanted him to beat them down, she said in a dispirited voice that there wasn't any point.

"They'll just come back by morning." She handed him a scorched can of stew, cautioning him to grip it with a rag because it was hot. "They're all over...millions of them."

"Yeah, some of 'em were busy making a nest out of ol' Bert." He sat down with his back to the wall, cradling the

stew. Watched her sit opposite him. She had taken off the slicker, and proved to be wearing jeans and a heavy white wool sweater. A bit on the skinny side, he thought; but not bad. She caught him staring at her, and he tapped his spoon on the can. "This is good."

She said nothing, continuing to stare, tension in her face.

"Is anything wrong?" he asked.

She gave a start as if her mind had been elsewhere, shrugged and said, "No."

"Must be something," he said. "You look like a little noise would put you through the roof."

She laughed nervously. "It must be the storm."

"Sure, now," he said in an arch tone. "That must be it."

She ducked her eyes, stirred her stew.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asked, and had another bite.

"Not very." She glanced up sharply, appeared about to say something else, but kept silent.

He spooned in more stew, chewed. "Tell me about yourself. Where are you from?"

"Woods Hole," she said listlessly.

"Never been there. I'm from New Bedford myself. And before that I was living in Belfast."

He had expected her to make some response, but she just kept on picking at the stew.

"I had to get out of there," he said. "Trouble with the Brits, y'know."

Silence.

"I was with the IRA," he added weakly, his mood hovering between anger at her disinterest and concern that she might not believe him. He decided on hostility. "Am I boring you?"

"In a way," she said. "In other ways...no."

"Oh, is that right?" He set down the can. "Then perhaps you should enlighten me as to how it is I'm boring you so I can avoid it in the future."

"It's not important," she said.

"Maybe not," he said. "But I've got a notion you're thinking badly of me."

"What if I am?"

"I'd prefer you didn't, that's all. Is it you're swallowing all the bloody Brit propaganda about the IRA? Because if that's it..."

"Stop," she said. "Just stop."

"Because if that's it," he went on, "I'm here to tell you it's nothing but a heap of lies."

"I don't want to hear it" Her voice shrilled. "Everything's enough of a lie as it is without you adding to it!"

"Listen to me, now!"

"No," she said. "You listen! You were born in Belfast, but you never had anything to do with the IRA. Three years ago you emigrated to work at your cousin's restaurant in New Bedford, and you've done nothing more notable since than get a local girl pregnant."

For a moment he sat stunned, unable to voice a denial. "How," he said finally, "how could you know that. I've never seen you before."

Her chin was trembling. "I've a gift," she said, and gave a despairing laugh.

"You mean you're psychic...something like that?"

She nodded.

He caught her wrist, angry, afraid, not wanting her to know his secrets; but she wrenched free and stared at the place where he had held her as if expecting to see a bruise. She looked up at him, and he thought he detected a new fervor in her eyes; he took it for disgust with his lies, and wanted—for a reason he couldn't quite fathom—to repair the damage.

"I'm sorry," he said, wanting to confess everything, to explain that self-deception had sustained him against the guilt he felt on fleeing Belfast. "You see, I was...My uncle was in the IRA. I never felt right that I didn't follow him. The family...he was all they ever talked about. My bloody Uncle Donald. Famous and in jail. But I couldn't take after Donald. I was afraid... that was part of it. But mostly I just never understood how it was you lifted a gun and killed a man. I mean, God, I hated the Brits. But I never could understand how it was you killed. You know what I'm telling you?"

She said nothing, but he could feel the pressure of her cold

blue eyes.

"Are you listening to me?" he said. "Goddamn it, I'm talking to you. Are you listening?"

"I am."

"I'm a coward," he said. "I'm not ashamed of it, really. I was worried what other people might think of me. Donald was so goddamn famous...I didn't want to suffer by comparison, and that's why I've lied. But I'm quite satisfied being a coward. There's nothing wrong with it. If there were more of us cowards, maybe the world would be a better place." He held her eyes, trying to read her opinion. "Well?"

"We're all of us frail." She said this with such wistfulness, he had the idea that she was not likely to judge him, that nothing he had done for bad or good was of any consequence to her. And that made him uncomfortable. Without the armor of lies, the motivation and structures of guilt to direct his conversation, he could think of nothing to say. He picked at a shred of beef with his fork.

"Do you want some more?" she asked.

"Not just yet."

Rain hissed against the shack, a gust of wind shuddered the boards, and thunder grumbled in the distance. "I should see about Bert," he said glumly. "He'll be hungry, too."

Astrid put a hand on his arm. "Stay awhile longer," she said. "Just a little while. I've been here alone for so long."

"How long have you been here?"

"Seems like years," she said distractedly.

Tyrell leaned back against the wall; despite his anxiety over having been caught in a lie, the warmth in his belly was making him feel relaxed and garrulous. "I suppose ol' Bert can wait for a bit." He gestured at the cobwebbed ceiling.

"Why don't you tell me about our tiny friends here?"

Her face froze.

"You said you were studying them, didn't you?"

"That's right," she said, a catch in her voice.

"So...what's their story?"

She said something he couldn't hear.

"What's that?"

"They're poisonous," she said.

"Poisonous?" He sat up straight, feeling the inflamed spots on his arms and legs. "Shit, I must have half-a-dozen bites! What should I do?"

"Don't worry," she said. "The poison acts quickly. There'll be some hallucinations, probably. But if you've been bitten and you're still alive, then you're immune." She laughed palely. "Like me."

He remembered Cisneros. "I've got to get Bert! They were all over him. I..." Something in her face stopped him, and a chill point materialized between his shoulder blades, expanded and fanned out across his back. "You were down at the bunker. You said he was sleeping."

"You'd been through so much," she said. "I didn't want to...I don't know. Maybe I should have told you. I was confused. I've been here so long with just the birds and spiders..." Her chin trembled, and her eyes glistened.

"What happened to him?"

"Your friend wasn't immune."

"What are you saying...he's dead?"

"Yes."

"Jesus." Tyrell glanced up to the ceiling, to the star-shaped white spiders crawling along their webs. He remembered talking to Cisneros that morning, nudging him, and the man already half a corpse. Filled with loathing, he jumped to his feet, grabbed a stick from the table top and began swatting at the webs.

"Don't...please!" Astrid caught him from behind, got a hand on the stick and wrestled for control of it. She looked terrified, wide-eyed, a nerve twitching in her cheek, and more than her struggles, it was the sight of her face that made him quit.

"What's the matter?" He pushed her away, swung the stick at the webs. "You like the little bastards, is that it?"

"No, it's not that. It's..."

He took her by the shoulders, gave her a shake. "Will you do me a favor? Tell me what it is with you? One second you act like I'm the last man in the world and you've a great inner

need for my company. The next it's like you've heard the beating of leathery wings and the howling of wolves." He shook her again. "There's something not right here. I want you to tell me what's going on."

"Nothing," she said. "Nothing."

"Damn it!" He slapped her. "Tell me!"

"Nothing! Nothing!"

He slapped her a second time.

"It's the truth!" She began half to laugh, half to cry, building toward hysteria. "Absolutely nothing! I swear it!"

Ashamed of himself, he helped her to sit and put his arm around her, comforting her with muttered assurances. Maybe it was loneliness that had gotten to her...that and the morbid nature of her studies. She'd probably been stranded here a week or so, and knowing what he did now, he doubted he'd be able to take more than a week on Nomans Land without showing a few cracks. She sighed, collapsed against him, nestling beneath his arm, and he was astonished at how settled and solid that little show of trust made him feel. He couldn't recall having felt this way for a very long time—perhaps he never had—and he wondered if it was the fact that he'd been forced into honesty, into confession, that had cleared away the rubble and granted him such a unimpeded view of himself and the world. It seemed that in giving up his defenses, his lies, he had also given up guilt and fear; and now, sitting here with his arm around a strange woman in a strange place, as vulnerable as he had ever been to the assaults of chance, he felt capable of making real choices, ones determined by logic and the heart's desire, and not reactions to something dread, something he wished to forget. His fear, too, had fled, and he could see that fear for him had not been specific, not merely concern for his own life in the political moil of sad Belfast; he had been frightened of everything, of every choice and possibility. And he realized that not only had his fear been based upon falsity, but that everything he had loved as well—women, country, and all—had been emblems of that fear, objects upon which he could pin the flag of his lies and the affectation of morality. Staring at

the grain of the weathered boards, as intricate and sharp as printed circuitry, he thought he could see the path ahead. How he would give up his illusory notions of heroism. Find a mild, strong life. Become an ordinary hero. Sacrificing for family, for friends. That was the best you could do. The world was too strong a spell for any single man or idea to break. No matter how passionate your outcry, how forceful your blood and intent, it went on and on in its wicked, convulsed web, spinning nightmares and tragedies. That was the lesson to be learned of Belfast, of all the wild boys and their warring heat. Surrender. Look within yourself for worlds to conquer and principles to overthrow.

He noticed that Astrid's breathing had grown deep and regular, and thinking she was asleep, he started to lower her to a prone position, intending to cover her with a blanket and then rub out the cramp that was developing in his arm. Her eyelids fluttered open, and she tightened her grip around his waist.

"Don't go," she whispered.

"You're asleep," he said.

"No, I'm not...I'm just resting."

"Well"—he chuckled—"maybe you better do your resting in the sleeping bag."

"All right."

She got to her feet sluggishly, went to the sleeping bag and then, her eyes downcast, kicked off her shoes and skinned out of her jeans. That caught him by surprise. He watched her work the jeans past her hips, step out of them with the delicate awkward poise of a crane. Her legs were long and lovely, pale, pale white, and he could see the honey-colored thatch of her pubic hair through the opaque crotch of her panties. His mouth was dry. He looked away, looked back as, instead of getting inside the sleeping bag, she lay down atop it, covering herself with a blanket. Her hips bridged up beneath the blanket, her hands pushed at her thighs, and he knew she was removing her panties. She turned onto her side, facing him. In the shadowy corner her eyes were large and full of lights.

"Come be with me," she said.

The storm slammed a wall of wind against the shack, rain drummed on the roof, and although Tyrell felt in the grasp of a curious morality, put off by Astrid's invitation, because they were strangers and this should not be happening, the fury of the storm moved him to stand. He went over to the table, extinguished the hurricane lamp. The cherry red concentric circles of the hot plate's heating coils floated on the darkness like bizarre halos. He stripped off his clothing and, shivering, squirmed in beneath the blanket, turning to her as he did. She had pushed her sweater up around her neck, and her breasts rolled and flattened against his chest, warming him. In the dim effusion of light from the hotplate her features were rapt, her eyes half-lidded. He wanted to ask her a question, to understand why this was happening, to make certain that it was nothing low, nothing small, but rather something clean and strong, something to suit the tenor of his cleansed sensibilities; but as she pressed close to him, he knew that it was good. He thought he could feel the whiteness of her limbs staining him, and when he sank into her, he felt the movement as a sweet gravity in his belly, the kind of sensation that comes when you take a tight curve in a fast car and settle back into the straightaway with the whole world pushing you deep into the plush tension of the machine.

"It's been so long," she whispered, holding him immobile, her hands locked around his back. "So long."

He wasn't sure of exactly what she meant, but it seemed true for him as well, it seemed forever since he had felt this perfect immersion, and he hooked his fingers into the plump meat of her hips, grinding her against him, easing deeper, dredging up a soft cry from her throat, and, without understanding anything at all, said, "I know, I know."

Tyrell waked to find the storm unabated. Pine branches scraped the outside of the walls, and the wind was a constant mournful pour off the sea. Dim reddish light fanned up from the hotplate, seeming to diffuse into a granular dust near the ceiling, like powdered rust on black enamel. He was disori-

ented by the oscillating pitch of the wind, the incessant seething of the rain, and to ground himself in waking he turned to Astrid, letting his left arm fall across her waist. She didn't stir. He peered at her, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, and when he made out her face, his heart was stalled by what he saw. Empty sockets; desiccated strings of tendon cabled across the bare cheekbone; the teeth gapped and the jawbone visible between tatters of yellow skin; hanks of pale hair attached to a parchment scalp. The stink of the grave cloyed in his nostrils, and he could feel her clamminess beneath his arm. He let out a shriek, rolled off the sleeping bag and onto the dry grasses covering the floorboards, and crouched there, panting, resisting the impulse to give in to fear, trying to persuade himself that he hadn't really seen it.

"Astrid?" he said.

Not a sound.

He fumbled for his jeans, struggled into them. Called her name louder. Nothing. His skin pebbled with goose flesh. He pulled on his sweater, slipped his feet into wet shoes.

"Astrid!" he said. "Wake up!"

He wanted to kneel beside her, to take a closer look and make sure of what he'd seen, but he couldn't work up the courage. He backed away. The corner of the table jabbed his thigh; the hurricane lamp swayed and nearly toppled. He caught it, fumbled on the table for a match. His hands were shaking so badly that he wasted three matches trying to light the lamp, and when the light grew steady, it took all his will power to turn toward the sleeping bag. He shrieked again and staggered against the door, unable to catch his breath, transfixed by the sight of that horrid death'shead poking from beneath the blanket, sightless eyes focused on a white spider dangling on a single thread just above the face. Then the strand snapped. The spider dropped into one of the empty eye sockets, and for the briefest of instants the eye appeared to twinkle.

Tyrell's control broke. Screaming, he clawed the door open and ran full tilt through the pines, wet branches whipping his face and chest. He burst out into the clearing, stopped

beside the wreckage of the main house. Rain slanted hard into his face, soaked the wool of his sweater. He wiped his eyes, started toward the beach, the bunkers, then pulled up, remembering that Cisneros was dead, not knowing in which direction safety lay. The winded pines bent their dark green tips, lightning made a vivid white crack in the massy leaden clouds of the eastern sky, and from the beach came the cannonading of the surf. Suddenly terrified that Astrid had followed him, he wheeled about. Someone was coming toward him from the pines. But it wasn't Astrid. It was Cisneros. Dressed in jeans and a wool hat and a slicker glistening with rain. Smiling.

Tyrell's thoughts were in chaos. He retreated from Cisneros, but as he did he realized that everything Astrid—ghost or whatever she was—had told him must have been a lie. Cisneros couldn't be dead. Obviously not. But he wasn't quite able to believe that, and he continued to retreat, calling out to Cisneros.

"Bert!" he shouted above the wind. "Where you been, Bert?"

"Hello, Jack! What's the problem, man?"

"Bert?" Tyrell was still uncertain who and what it was that confronted him. "I left you in the bunker. I was coming back, but I wanted to let you sleep."

"I had a real good sleep," said Cisneros, closing on him. "Nice dreams. What you been doing?"

"Trying to find some food."

"Find any?"

Tyrell's answer died still-born. His stomach was full—no doubt about that. And if Astrid was a ghost, how could that be? He wiped his eyes clear of rain again, thoroughly befuddled. Cisneros had stopped a few feet away, his image blurred by the rain driving into Tyrell's face.

"You look fucked up, man," said Cisneros. "There's no reason be fucked up. This is a good place."

Tyrell spat out a sardonic laugh. "Oh, right!"

"You having a bad time, man?" Cisneros chuckled. "Just take it easy. Relax. God is here."

"God?" A chill began to map Tyrell's spine; his scrotum tightened, and he blinked away the raindrops, trying to bring Cisneros into clearer focus. He felt at the center of a grayish green confusion, a medium without form, without border, the only real thing in a vast unreality. "What do you mean... 'God?'"

"I'm not talking 'bout Jesus," said Cisneros with another sly chuckle. "Oh, no! I'm not talking 'bout Jesus."

"Well, what *are* you talking about?"

"It's interesting," said Cisneros. "I wonder if the idea of God was based on a premonition of what exists here. It's possible, you know. It's obvious there are some astounding similarities between the laws of karma, certain Christian tenets, and the true process of the"—he sniffed, amused—"the divine."

Cisneros' unnatural fluency and abstract self-absorption disconcerted Tyrell; he'd always been one to put on airs, but because he had nothing intelligent to say, the effect had been ludicrous. Now the effect was a little scary.

The rain intensified, and Cisneros wavered like a mirage. Something was dangling from his hand, swinging back and forth, and peering through the rain, Tyrell saw that it was an eight-pointed star that had been crudely carved from a piece of seashell, holed, and strung on a length of twine.

"What's that?" Tyrell asked.

"Just something I made while I was waiting for you." Cisneros flipped the star high, grabbed it in his fist. "Things have changed for me, Jack. I'm not the man I used to be."

"Well, none of us are, Bert old son," said Tyrell, trying to make light of it and taking a backward step. "It's been one hell of a night."

"That's true," said Cisneros. "But it's much more than that. It's the only truth there is."

Tyrell noticed for the first time that the rain didn't seem to be bothering Cisneros: it trickled into his eyes, yet he never even blinked. He wanted to run, but he didn't know if there was a secure place to hide, and neither did he know what exactly he would be hiding from.

"Tell me about God, Bert," he said, deciding against fear, hoping that Cisneros' behavior was merely derangement resulting from exposure and fatigue.

"You really want that, Jack? You don't look like the kind of man cares too much 'bout God. But"—Cisneros twirled his little star on its string—"if you want to hear, you come to the right place. 'Cause I'm the man's going to tell everybody 'bout God. Soon as I get off this island, that's what I'm going to do. Preach the truth 'bout the God that is and the world that isn't." His smile seemed the product of absolute serenity. "You understand?"

"Not hardly," said Tyrell. "Why don't you explain it to me?"

"This world," said Cisneros, waving at the pines, "it's nothing but a dream." He giggled. "The thing is, nobody knows who's doing the dreaming. Nobody 'cept me."

"And who's that?"

"And when I tell everybody," Cisneros went on, ignoring the question, "when I tell 'em nothing's all there is, that anything they do is all right, 'cause there's nothing for anybody to hurt, it's all a dream...then there's going to be chaos. Maybe it'll be blood and sex and madness. A beautiful chaos of dreams. But maybe it'll be the beginning of a new and glorious potential. I believe that might just be the case, I really do. I believe that beauty and hope will be reborn. Why else would they bother?"

Tyrell kept up his bold front, but kept on sizing up the possibilities of flight and hiding. "Is that so, Bert?"

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"Nobody's going to believe you...an illiterate little Portuguese. They'll laugh your ass back to New Bedford."

"Want me to prove it, Jack? They've taught me how to do quite a few tricks. I'm sure I can find one that'll impress you."

"I'd love it. Go ahead...show me your stuff."

"It'll be my pleasure." Cisneros' smile broadened, displaying his gold teeth; his dark seamed face looked to have an impish, stylized evil, its detail lost in the streaming rain. Then the face began to pale. "Dreams, Jack," he said. "That's all

there is. Dreams like me, like you. Like your girlfriend back in the shack."

Tyrell started to ask how he had known about Astrid, but alarm stifled his curiosity, held him motionless and cold. Cisneros was fading, growing vague and indistinct, becoming a ghost in the rain. Yet his voice remained strong.

"You remember this, Jack, when you think you know something. You know nothing, man. Nothing. You're smoke, you're haze on the water, you're not even real as the dew. And what you feel and what you know is even less real than that. Just think of yourself as a spark flying up against the darkness, visible for a moment, then gone. But not gone forever, Jack. Gone forever, that's for real things, things that live and die. You're in the wind, a pattern, a shape that what's real calls back now and again to play with, to make new dreams, to amuse itself. You're part of a game, a dream actor in a play."

Cisneros had almost completely disappeared; all that remained was a roughly human shape hollowed from the rain, an indistinct opacity against the backdrop of the pines.

"Dreams," came Cisneros' voice, a sonorous whisper rising above the keening of the wind. "Sometimes they're beautiful, Jack. Beautiful and slow and serene."

More lightning in the east, accompanied by a savage crack of thunder.

"And sometimes they're nightmares."

7

How, Cisneros thought, could he have sunk to the depths that he had in his former life? How could he have been such a posturing bully, a tormentor of women and the weak? He supposed that—like most of his friends—he had been enslaved by tradition, by the spiritual and physical meanness of life among the Portuguese of New Bedford. It was for certain that his father's constant abuse of his mother had informed his own behavior, and he had not been able to rise above those origins. Well, now he had been given a chance for redemption...more, his lifelong desire for knowledge and the skills with which to employ it had been satisfied, and he planned to take full advantage of the opportunity. And in the process of spreading the truth he would make up all the bad times to his wife and children, to everyone whom he had wronged. He, unlike Tyrell, had untapped potential; he was capable of change. He knew how foolish it was to take pride in himself considering his ephemeral nature; but although he was merely a creation, an illusion, that was no excuse to ignore the decencies or to deny his potential. Even if Tyrell were able to accept the way things were, which Cisneros doubted, he would never be able to maintain his humanity; he was not strong, not resilient. It was a pity, but Cisneros had no time to spare on pity. He had a world to teach, to enlighten, and Tyrell's fate was not his concern. Later he'd have another try at talking with him. But for now there was so much to learn, so much to understand. He let himself fade into the dream and the deep places beneath it, where he communed with the trillion forms of his Creator.

8

It was almost twilight, the storm still raging, before Tyrell screwed up the courage to approach the bunker. He was soaked to the skin, his sweater a foul-smelling matte of drenched wool, and he was shaking with cold; yet he stood at the side of the bunker for quite some time, leery of discovering what lay within. Huge slate-colored waves marbled with foam piled in from the sea, crashing explosively on the eroded beach, driving a thin tide to the bunker's lip, then retreating, leaving a slope of tawny sand cut by deep channels; the wind flattened the grass at the crest of the dunes. But despite the ferocity of the elements, Tyrell sensed that the worst of the weather was past, that by morning the sea would be calm and the sky clear and any fire set upon the beach would be noticed by the keeper of the Gay Head light. One more night, then, and he would be safe. But that one night loomed endlessly before him, and he realized that he was in great peril from the terrors of his mind...if from nothing else. That, he thought, must be the cause of everything he had seen and felt. The trauma of the fire aboard the *Preciosilla*, of the swim to shore...these things must have unhinged him in some way, because he was not about to believe in what he had seen. And if he was ever going to quell his fears, he had to take a look inside the bunker, to begin ordering his mind, firming it against the solitude of the night ahead.

Finally, steeling himself, he made his way down the slope, sinking to mid-calf with every step in the wet sand. He paused at the corner of the bunker, drawing strength from the power of the sea, filling his chest with its power, its briny

smell; then he slogged around the corner and peered in over the lip. He felt relief on seeing Cisneros lying curled up in the shadow of the lip, still wearing his black slicker and jeans, his face turned to the wall.

"Bert!" he shouted. "Wake up!"

Cisneros didn't move; cobwebs bridged between his shoulders and the bunker wall, and more cobwebs formed a linkage between his ankles, his knees. No spiders in sight...not on his body, anyway. And not as many as there had been on the fouled walls and ceiling.

"Come on, Bert," he said, a real wealth of anxiety and pleading in his voice. "Get the fuck up!"

Maybe he *was* dead, Tyrell thought. And what did that say about Astrid? He'd half-talked himself into believing that she hadn't been real, but if what she had told was true...Christ, it was all craziness! He doubted he would ever be able to sort it out. He shouted again, and again Cisneros made no response. He drew a breath, held it, leaned in over the lip and poked the sleeping man with a forefinger.

The finger sank knuckle-deep into Cisneros' shoulder, and Tyrell felt ticklish movement along its length.

He cried out in shock, fell back. Cisneros' body rippled and shifted, and as Tyrell watched it began to break apart, the realistic-looking slicker, the jeans, the seam of swarthy skin visible between the ragged black hair and the slicker's collar, all dissolving into in a myriad separate white shapes, thousands and thousands of spiders spilling, crawling over one another, proving that the body had been composed of nothing but tiny arachnid forms, a boiling nest of little horrors, a tide of them that scuttled across the floor and fumed toward him over the edge of the lip.

Tyrell screamed and screamed, scrambling away from the bunker, falling, wriggling on his back, then crawling toward the sea, right to the verge, into cold water. He sat up, staring at the bunker. The spiders had not followed him; they were poised on the lip, all in a row, riding one another, a fringe of them several inches thick, and he had the idea that they were watching him, amused by his panic. He got to his feet,

gasping, choking on fear, and there was an explosion at his back. He turned just in time to be knocked flat by an enormous breaker that dragged him over the coarse sand of the slope. He scrambled up, coughing up salt water. The mass of spiders was still perched on the lip, still watching. He started to his right. Stopped. Went to his left. Stopped. A sob loosened in his chest, and his eyes filled.

"Oh, Jesus God," he said, singing it out above the pitch of the wind. "Please don't do this!"

A lesser wave broke at his back, sending a flow of chill water rushing about his knees.

"Please," he said. "I don't want this anymore."

He wished there was someone who could answer, someone to whom he could appeal this thoroughly unfair circumstance. That, he thought, would be his best hope, because it was for certain there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But at last, having no other option, he began to run, giving the bunker a wide berth, pumping his knees, mounting the dune and cresting it, picking his way nimbly among the overgrown craters and through the pines. He came to feel light in running, as if each step might lift him high above the island, even above the storm, and seizing upon this comforting irrationality among all the terrifying irrationalities that ruled over Nomans Land, he thought he might be able to run forever, or until he dropped, or until something even more irrational happened, something that through terror or pain would set him free once and for all from the fear that had ruled him for so long.

Night, a toiling darkness illuminated by strokes of red lightning that spread down the darkness like cracks in a black and fragile shell, and a flickering orange light was shining beneath the ill-fitting door of Astrid's shack. Tyrell stood in the pines, hugging himself for warmth, his teeth chattering, chilled to the bone. Hallucinations, she'd said. Maybe that had been responsible for all that had happened. Hallucinations brought on by the spiders' venom. If her version of things were accurate—hallucinations, Bert dead—then he

had nothing to fear inside the shack. He wanted badly to believe her, because then he could get warm. Warmth seemed the most important quality in all the world, and he realized he was going to have to give it priority very soon or else he was not going to survive. He kept edging nearer to the shack, stopping, listening, hoping to pick up some sign of occupancy and from that sign to gauge the nature of the occupant. But the only sounds were the pissing of the rain in the pine boughs, the moaning of the wind, and the occasional concussion from the sky.

Tyrell crept to the side of the door, peered in through a gap in the boards, but could make out nothing apart from blurred orange light. He could feel the warmth inside, steaming out at him, and its allure drew him to pull the door open. The shack was empty. After a moment's hesitation he ducked inside and closed the door behind him. He stripped off his clothing, wrapped himself in one of the blankets and stood by the hotplate, warming his hands over the coils, standing there until his shaking had stopped. Then he sat down on the sleeping bag, covered himself with a second blanket, and stared blankly at the ceiling, where dozens of white spiders patrolled the intricate strands of their webs. He felt weak in every joint, every extremity, too weak to consider doing anything about the spiders, and he became mesmerized by their delicate movements. There seemed to be patterns involved in their shifting, at the heart of which was the maintenance of a structure, a constant process of adjustment, of equalization. He laughed at himself. *Christ, you're really losing it, you are!* He settled back against the wall, let his eyes close; the light of the hurricane lamp acquired a dim yellowish-orange value through his lids, like the color of a summer sunset, a clean, sweet color, and it seemed he was falling into it, drifting away on a calm breeze that carried him beyond this storm, beyond all storms.

He came awake to find Astrid looking down at him, shrugging out of her slicker. He sat up, tension cabling the muscles in his neck and shoulders, waiting for her to change back into a corpse. But no change occurred. She ran her hands along

the sides of her head, pulling the damp heft of her hair into a sleek ponytail.

"I was worried about you," she said. "I didn't know where you'd gone."

He had trouble mustering speech. "I...uh..." He swallowed. "It was those hallucinations you talked about. I woke up and saw something that frightened me."

"What did you see?" She kneeled beside him, and he had to restrain himself from scrambling away.

He told her what he'd seen in the shack, in the bunker; once he had finished he laughed nervously and said, "When you said there might be hallucinations, I didn't think you had anything like that in mind."

She plucked at a wisp of grass, her features cast in a somber expression. "I have to tell you the truth," she said. "I don't suppose it's very important whether or not you believe me. Or maybe it is...maybe it's important in some way I don't understand. But I do have to tell you."

He felt something bad coming; a sour cold heaviness was collecting in his gut, and the weakness in his limbs grew more profound.

"I came here in the summer of 1964," she said. I..." She broke off, reacting to his horrified stare. "I'm not a ghost...not in the way you think. Not any more than you are."

"What the hell's that mean?"

"Just listen," she said. "It's going to be very hard for you to believe this, and you won't have a chance of understanding unless you listen carefully and hear me out. All right?"

He nodded, too frightened to move, to do other than listen.

"I came here in '64," she continued. "To study the spiders. I'd heard about them from a botanist who'd spent time on the island, and I'd seen a specimen. That was enough to convince me that we were dealing with a entirely new subspecies and not just a variant. Their poison, in particular, fascinated me. It incorporated an incredibly complex DNA. Do you know what that is? DNA?"

"I've a fair idea," he said.

"Okay." She put her hand to her brow, pinched the bridge

of her nose, a gesture—it seemed to Tyrell—of weariness. “God, there’s so much to tell!”

This sign of weakness on her part boosted his confidence. “Go ahead. We’ve got all night.”

“At least that,” she said; she drew a breath, let it sigh out. “Aside from the DNA, I found what appeared to be fragments of human RNA in the poison.” She looked at him questioningly.

“Something to do with memory, storing memory or something...is that right?”

“Near enough.”

Wind curled in beneath the door to rustle the dry grasses carpeting the floor; the flame of the hurricane lamp flickered, brightened, and a tide of orange light momentarily eroded the edge of the shadows on the walls. The rain had let up to a drizzle, and the thunder had quit altogether. The storm, Tyrell realized, was nearing its end. For some reason this made him anxious. He was not feeling very well. He kept wishing for something solid, some edifice of thought to hang onto; but there was nothing within reach, and this caused him even more anxiety. He tried to focus on Astrid’s words.

“Anyway,” she went on, “after a week or so I ran up against some pretty frightening questions. The poison, I’d discovered, was unbelievably potent. I figured that death would follow within seconds of a bite. Yet I’d been bitten many times and I was still alive. And I couldn’t understand how the spiders had been isolated on the island. Surely, I thought, they must have been carried off on the boats that had landed here over the years ever since the Indians occupied the land. And if that had been the case, given their hardiness, their breeding capacity, there wouldn’t be too many people left alive. Without a sophisticated technology, there was no way an antidote could have been produced. The poison was extremely complex.” Another sigh. “Then I began having dreams.”

Tyrell remembered Cisneros, his ravings. “What kind of dreams?”

“They weren’t dreams, they were experiences of other

lives. Men, women, children. All from different eras, some of them Indian lives from pre-colonial times. None earlier than that. It wasn't that I was watching them. I was inside their heads, living their days and nights. And it was from these dreams that I began to understand the truth, that the spiders had been transported off-island...a long, long time ago. They'd been carried to the mainland, back to Europe on the colonial vessels and then gradually had spread to Asia, Africa. Everywhere. By my estimate their population had come to span the world by the mid-Nineteenth Century. I very much doubt that humanity survived into the Twentieth. Of course what I know of human history belies that...that's part of their fabrication. But in reality the last hundred years or so of mankind must have been awful. People dying and dying. The population shrinking to a mere handful of souls who hadn't been bitten."

It took him a long moment to absorb what she had said. "Now wait a minute! We're living proof of..."

"No, we're not," she said. "We're not alive. We never were." He tried to interrupt, but she talked over him. "I don't understand it completely. Or perhaps I do. I can't be sure. It's difficult to explain things in human terms, because though the spiders with their poison have managed to ensure a kind of human survival, I have no idea of their motivations...or if they even have motivations. This may all be reflex on their part. Or maybe it's that they've become a unity, intelligent in some way due to a symbiotic use of our genetic material. A group mind or something of the sort. Maybe the best analogy would be to say...Have you heard about the concept of people's personalities being translated into computer software? That's similar to what the spiders have done. Transformed our genetic material into a biological analogue of software." She blew out a sharp breath between her pursed lips. "I think sometimes that it's all a game to them, a pageant, this continuation of the history of a dead race. The way they appear to attach special significance to this island, for instance. Once in awhile they act out a scene or two on the island, and the human creations involved, like you and me,

it's as if they develop a fondness for them. They bring them back over and over, and occasionally they'll let them live"—she laughed—"happily. As if they were celebrating us, thanking us for what we've done for them by dying, by affording them a new level of consciousness." She took his hand. "Do you remember asking me why it was that one moment I'd be looking at you with longing, and the next I'd be frightened? It's because I think they mean for us to live happily for awhile. I want that so much! I don't want to lose the chance. Maybe it's only a dream, an illusion. But it feels so good, so strong, to be even this much alive compared to what I've been...almost nothing, a flicker of consciousness subsumed into a hive of dreams."

He pulled his hand away from her. "You're fucking crazy!"

"I know that's how it sounds..."

"No, it doesn't *sound* crazy. It *is* crazy!" He drew up his knees, shifted deeper into the corner; the lamplight fell across his toes, and when he pulled them back into shadow he felt much more secure. "You sit here and tell me that we're the figments of the imagination of a bunch of goddamn spiders, and that they've been carrying out the evolution of human history in this fantasy world they've created..."

"Yes, I..."

"And you expect me to swallow *that*? Jesus Christ, woman!"

"I'd think," she said stiffly, "that of all people you'd be able to comprehend it...what with your living in a fantasy of your own all these years."

"When it comes to fantasy, lady, I can't hold a candle to you."

"It's not so alien as it seems," she said. "Philosophers have been..."

He snorted in contempt.

"...saying more or less the same thing for centuries. Think about it. Didn't your friend say what I have? Didn't he?"

His shock at her knowing what Cisneros had said must have showed on his face, because she laughed.

"How could I have known that?" she said. "I couldn't

have...not unless his truth had been communicated to me through dreams." Again she took his hand. "You'll understand sooner or later. It's always hard for those of us who're brought to the island to accept. It's like waking up to find you're dreaming. But eventually you become sensitized to what they intend, what their patterns are, their tendencies."

Tyrell shook free of her, his mind whirling. Had everything he'd seen and felt since his arrival been an hallucination? That couldn't be right. The hallucination theory, that was *hers*, and so it had to be wrong. No, wait. She'd denied that one when she'd tried to convince him about the spiders. So maybe it *was* right after all. Maybe this whole thing had been a fever dream, maybe he was lying passed out in the bunker, or maybe even back in his berth aboard the *Preciosilla*. His thoughts went skittering away into the corners of his brain, hiding like spiders in the convolutions, and he sat empty and unknowing, bewildered by the infinity of confusions accessible to him. Astrid said something, but he refused to listen, certain that whatever she would tell him would only offer more confusion. He could hear his thoughts ticking in secret, little bombs waiting to explode. His heart was ticking, too. The entire world was running on the same pulse, building and building to an explosive moment. He closed his eyes, and the light seemed to be growing brighter, more solid, to pry beneath his lids with thin glowing orange talons.

"Jack! Look at me!"

Oh, no! He remembered what had happened the last time he'd had a look at her after a long interval.

"Are you all right, Jack?"

Let me be, damn you!

She was very near, her breath warm on his cheek, and he couldn't resist taking a peek. That close to him, her face was a touch distorted; but it was her face. Strong Scandinavian features framed by hair like white gold. She looked beautiful in her concern, and he didn't trust that. Not one bit.

"Don't leave me, Jack," she said. "You have to understand...they've given us a chance to live, for more of a life than anyone else can have. But you have to accept things, you

can't go against them. They'll simply...stop you. Do you understand?"

"Yes...yes, I understand."

He couldn't take his eyes off her, waiting for the smooth skin and icy eyes and white teeth to give way to corruption and pocked bone.

"Do you remember earlier?" she asked. "Making love?"

"Uh-huh."

"Make love to me now. I want to feel that way again."

Her face drew closer yet, and he knew what the plan was now. They would wait until he was kissing her to make the change, and he would find himself kissing death, his tongue probing into a joyless void of rotted gums and broken teeth. Revolted, he shoved her hard, sending her back against the table. Her head struck the corner, cutting short her scream, and she fell on her side. He sat there, breathing rapidly, expecting her to get up. Then he noticed the blood miring the back of her pale blond head.

"Astrid!"

He threw off the blanket, crawled over to her, searched for a pulse.

She was dead.

Well, he thought, that proved she was wrong. You had to be alive in order to die.

Didn't you?

He was repelled by his insensitivity, by how casually he could accept the death of this woman with whom he had made love only hours before.

But maybe they *hadn't* made love, maybe...

He scrambled to his feet. Time to stop this shit, stop this ridiculous metaphysical merry-go-round. He'd killed a woman. She'd been a lunatic, but he was liable for the act, and he'd damn well better cover his tracks. He struggled into his wet clothes, trying to think, but his thoughts were muddy, circulating with sluggish inefficiency. Then in pulling on his trousers he lurched into the table and nearly overturned the lamp. He grabbed it by the handle, held it above the table a moment. A mad little idea crackled in his head. Kill two birds

with one stone, he would. He wedged his feet into his shoes, avoiding looking at the body. But as he shrugged on his slicker, his eyes fell upon it and emotion tightened his chest. A tear leaked down onto his cheek.

"Aw, Jesus!" he said. "I didn't mean to."

As if Jesus were listening.

He made promises to God. *Lord, he said to himself, get me out of this. I swear I'll live a clean life. I'll go back to Ireland, I'll take a stand for God and country.*

And then he chastised himself for his weakness. He'd done the deed, and he'd have to face up to the consequences.

Damn! Did every fucking thing you decided about your life, your morality, sound as feckless and unattached to reality as the things he was trying to decide?

He backed to the door, pushed it open and held the lamp high. Astrid's body receded into shadow; only her feet were in the light. He said a prayer for her, for himself. Then he dashed down the lamp, and as the grass upon the floor burst into flames, he sprinted out into the darkness.

Within seconds the entire shack was ablaze, flames snapping, shooting into the starless sky, high and bright enough that they would surely be seen by the keeper at Gay Head. Tyrell had become so accustomed to the violence of the storm that the relative calmness of the night felt unnatural, inimical. He glanced behind him, expecting some threat to show itself; but there were only the pines, the faintly stirring dark. When he turned back to the shack, however, he saw that the threat he most feared had materialized.

It was a spectacular sight, with the flames leaping, wisping into thin smoke and sparks that shot out into eloquent curves over the pine tops, and the shack itself a skeleton with molten knots of fire peeping between the boards...so spectacular, in fact, that at first Tyrell didn't notice movement inside the building. And when he did notice it, something dark and spindly twisting and rippling behind a wall of flame, he thought it merely some internal structure being eaten by the fire. But then that something came toward the door, paused in the doorway, a black streaming figure with fiery hair and

stick-thin limbs, reminding him of the captain in the burning wheelhouse of the *Preciosilla*. But he knew this was not the captain. The figure stood for a few seconds without moving; then, with the slow precision of a signalman, it began to wave its arm back and forth, back and forth, each repetition of the gesture charging Tyrell with the voltage of fear. He would have liked to bellow, to scream, to roar, anything to release the tension inside him; but he was enervated, on the verge of collapse, and he managed only a muted squawk. The muscles of his jaw trembled, and his heart seemed to have tripled its rhythm, less beating than quivering in the hollow of his chest.

He was too frightened to turn his back on the burning figure, and he retreated slowly, carefully, feeling behind him, brushing aside clumps of wet needles, dragging his feet so he wouldn't stumble and pitch over into one of the craters. Only after he had put a hundred feet between himself and the shack, its fierce reddish orange glow like that of a miniature sun fallen from the heavens, casting the pine trunks in stark silhouette...only then did he run, breaking free of the pines, climbing to the crest of the dune overlooking the bunker, and there sinking to his knees. Neither exhausted nor out of breath, of strength, but rather totally confused, seeing no point in further flight. He sat cross-legged, watching the amber sweep of the Gay Head light across the bottom of pale scudding clouds, feeling empty, hollow, barely registering the gentle touch of the wind on his face, watching the pitch and roil of the sea, which was still heavy and running high.

"Hello, Jack," said a man's voice to his right.

Nothing could shock Tyrell anymore. He felt a prickle of cold traipse along his neck like the tip-toeing of a spider, but nothing more. He turned his head a quarter of an arc and saw a man standing some ten or twelve feet away. A most unusual man, a man who in outline displayed the short, bandy-legged form of Bert Cisneros, complete to the shape of the wool hat atop his head, but whose substance was the blue darkness of the night sky beset with a sprinkling of white many-pointed stars.

"That you, Bert?" asked Tyrell.

"More or less," said Cisneros. "You know how it is."

"No, I don't, Bert. Maybe that's my problem. I don't have a fucking clue about how it is."

"I tried to tell you." Cisneros flung out a starry arm, gesturing inland. "And so did she."

The stars in his body were moving, shifting into strange alignments, like living constellations. It was troubling to see, and Tyrell lowered his eyes to the sand.

"Was that the truth, then?" he asked.

"The truth." Cisneros laughed. "No matter how illusory a species we are, every man's still his own truth. I've heard you say much the same thing, Jack."

"Did I, now? I wonder what I meant by it."

"You'll understand soon enough."

An immense slow wave lifted from the dark, towering over the beach, and came crashing down, its vast tonnage exploding into splinters of white spray. The smell of brine was strong.

"So what's to happen now?" asked Tyrell.

"For you?"

"Yeah, for me."

"I'm afraid you're just not cut out for the next part, Jack" said Cisneros. "It sometimes happens that the created prove unsuitable. Not even the creators are infallible."

Tyrell sniffed. "I was ever a disappointment to my mother, too." He was silent a moment, tracing a line in the sand with his forefinger. "I'd like to believe that Astrid's alive somehow...that either what you're saying's true, or else that I'm round my fucking twist and none of this is happening."

"Don't worry about it," said Cisneros. "Nothing I tell you is going to be a solid assurance one way or the other. It's not in your nature to accept that from me. But you haven't done anything to be ashamed of...not really."

"From all you're telling me, Bert, can I assume that given your version of reality is accurate, we still have a bit of free will left to us."

"If you want to call it that. Things are actually little different

from how you always thought they were. The only salient difference is that instead of an unknown mystical creator, there's a knowable, explicable one. Of course in the beginning"—Cisneros shrugged—"who can say?"

Tyrell glanced at him, then away. "Even if you are a hallucination, you're still an asshole. I never could figure how an ignorant git like yourself could think he knew *anything*. But maybe you do know something now. Whatever, you *are* a changed man, Bert. And I'm not talking about the suit of special effects. Quite erudite, you are. They must have something important in mind for you."

"It's as I told you," said Cisneros. "As I've shown you. I am to instruct with words and miracles. To invest the play with a new spirit. Who knows what the result may be?"

"You sound pretty much in control, Bert. You sure about that? You sure the fucking spiders haven't got something nasty in mind for you? I mean, how come an asshole like you, a real punk...how come you get to win the world?"

"God works in mysterious ways."

A broken laugh guttered out between Tyrell's teeth. "I wish I could buy all this crap."

"So do I, Jack. So do I." Cisneros sidled off a couple of feet. "I'm going to leave you now. Things are at an end here, and I can't help you. Perhaps someday we'll meet again. You never know."

"I suppose I should be hoping for that eventuality," said Tyrell without taking his eyes from the patch of sand before him. "But tell you truth, I don't hope for it a hell of a lot."

When he looked up after a minute or so, Cisneros was gone. But he was not alone. Horribly burned, her face melted and blackened, her eyes like shattered opaque crystals, breasts smeared into shapeless masses, bone showing through the crispy meat of her right leg, Astrid was standing where Cisneros had been. Tyrell's gorge rose, his fear returned. But nonetheless he remained sitting on the dune top. "Go away, damn you," he said.

He heard a horrid wheezing and recognized it for the sound of air passing in and out of charred lungs; the breeze

rustled frays of burned skin on her arms. He buried his face in his hands. "Oh, God!" he said. "Just let me be for a little while, all right? Just let me be."

A throaty husk of a noise, speech trying to issue from her throat.

"Ahh!" He pushed himself erect, tripped, rolled down the face of the dune. He got to one knee, gazed back up to the crest. For a moment he thought she had vanished, but then the Gay Head light flashed across her, etching an image into Tyrell's mind: a female thing with black crusted thighs, her flesh displaying shiny fracture lines like overlapping slabs of anthracite. Blind eyes. Bits of papery skin fluttering like hanks of hair from her skull in the fitful wind. The image wouldn't fit inside his head. It kept expanding, forcing out thoughts, until there was no room for anything else, and still it continued to expand, driving a hoarse cry out of his chest, sending him staggering toward the edge of the shore.

He couldn't see Astrid, but he felt the push of her vision, and to escape that he waded out into the water, going waist-deep, breasting into a crawl that took him flush into a breaking wave. He dived underwater into the heart of the wave, felt it billow above him, and surfaced in a trough so deep that he could not locate the shore. The water was terribly cold, but after a few seconds his flesh grew numb, and this lack of sensation inspired him. He stroked away from the island, realizing that this way led to death, but no longer caring, no longer willing to suffer the obscenities that sprouted from the darkness of Nomans Land. Another wave lifted above him, and again he dived into its heart, surfacing far beyond it. All around, the sea was peaking into enormous waves whose flowing slopes carried him high, then sent him hurtling into pitch-black valleys. He tried to swim, but it was futile. The weight of his soaked clothing was dragging him under, and his feeble strokes were merely exertion, serving no purpose. Fear overwhelmed him. A cry formed in his throat. But as he went slipping into yet another valley, the momentum of that rushing decline dissipated the cry and he felt exhilarated, like a child on a carnival ride. He went under,

came up choking, flailing, spitting salt water. The tilting side of a swell bore him under a second time. He beat his way to the surface, thrusting his head into the air, knowing that he was drowning, that the cold had robbed him of strength, regretting now his decision to flee the island, regretting everything, his lost opportunities, his failures, the loss of fleeting moments of happiness, so few by comparison to the long periods of doldrums that had dominated his life. But as he sank for a last time, a white nail driving itself into the black flesh of the sea, at the core of his panic and regret was a profound satisfaction, the knowledge that he was dying, *really* dying, that madness had afflicted him and nothing of what he had undergone on the island had the least reality. That he was a man and not a pale imagined thing. He had a moment of bitterness amidst his fear. What had he done to deserve this? He was no worse than most, no more a coward or charlatan. He didn't think these things as much as he experienced them in a bleak current of emotion, and once that current had exhausted itself, he accepted—along with the unfairness of life—the cold embrace of the sea and sank twisting into the depths, his arms floating up with the grace of a slow dancer, his lungs filling, his mind growing as black and serene as the water surrounding him, dwindling to a point of ebony stillness that seemed to hang in a suspension, a peaceful place between dread and the object of dread in which he perceived the pure thing of his soul, his essential things, touched them, found them strong and unafraid, and then, this necessary business done, he went without reservation about the small and final business of his dying.

9

Two nights after being rescued by the Coast Guard from Nomans Land, Bert Cisneros sat drinking beer at a table in the Atlantic Cafe on Nantucket, where just that afternoon he had been interviewed by members of a review board assembled by the Maritime Union and by the owners of the *Preciosilla*. He was accompanied by two friends from New Bedford, Portuguese sailors who were in aspect and temperament much like his former self and hailed from the fishing vessel *Cariño*, which had put into port during the storm and was currently undergoing engine repairs. One of the men, Jose Nascimento, after listening to the relation of Cisneros' adventures with spiders and dreams, asked if this was the same story he had told the investigative board.

"No," said Cisneros. "The time wasn't right then to begin the process of illumination."

His companions exchanged looks of concern; they had never heard their friend speak in such a manner.

"But now," Cisneros went on, "now the time has come." His gaze swept over the dark, monkeylike faces of his companions. "You don't believe anything I've said, do you?"

"Hey, Bert," said Nascimento. "You been through some rough shit, man. You a little fucked up right now. Don't worry 'bout it."

"That's right," said the second man, Arcoles Gil. "You be fine pretty soon. Just take it easy, have another beer."

"Don't you notice a difference in me?" Cisneros asked.

"Well," said Gil, "you talkin' funny, that's for sure."

"It's not only my way of speaking that's changed," said

Cisneros. "I've changed utterly. When I think back to the man I was, the things I did, particularly the things I did to women..."

"You gotta hit a woman sometimes, man," said Nascimento. "Shit, Bert. You know that. Sometimes they put you in a position where you ain't got no choice, where if you don't hit 'em, they cut off your balls."

Cisneros felt sad for Nascimento. Looking at his friend was like looking into a mirror that reflected his own past foulness and brutal stupidity. It would be easy now, given his new perspective, to try and put his old life behind him, to hide the past away and neglect his friends in the interests of complacency and contentment. But Bert Cisneros was a man of honor. It was his duty, his trust, to bring enlightenment to men like Nascimento. To all men.

"When I think back on what I've done," he said, "despite the fact I realize that my entire life is a beautifully articulated fantasy, I'm sick to my stomach." He paused, thoughtfully rubbing the little eight-pointed star he had brought from the island with the tips of his fingers. "I often wonder if this violent dream the spiders have made of the Twentieth Century is an accurate reflection of what would have occurred had humanity survived...if through some biochemical genius they've manage to predict the twists and turns that would have resulted from human greed and lust. I don't suppose the answer's important any longer. Now that I've been called to inform the world of its insubstantial nature, perhaps things will be returned to a kind of normalcy. Perhaps we'll be able to regain control of our destiny...no matter how illusory it is. After all, who can judge the potentials of an illusion? But I really believe they want something good for us."

The men's faces displayed both pity and alarm, and Cisneros laughed. "Come, my friends," he said, getting to his feet. "I'll prove it to you." They remained seated. "Come on! I'll prove it in a way you won't be able to deny. I'll show you what the world really looks like. Come on!"

Grudgingly, they followed him through the crowd at the

bar to the door of the cafe, and then along the sidewalk until they came to the main street of the town. Buildings of brick and wood frame, cobblestones, a few cars moving, pedestrians looking into hotly lit shop windows. Graceful old trees leaning in over the roof tops.

"What do you see?" Cisneros asked.

Gil and Nascimento once again exchanged concerned glances.

"The street," said Gil with a puzzled expression.

"No," said Cisneros. "You only see a dream. I'll show you the *street*."

He concentrated his will, and within seconds the scene before him rippled, wavered, like something melting in the rain, and in its place, lit by a bone-white full moon, was a ruin. Sad fragments of another time, another dream. The broken shells of weathered gray houses fettered in ivy, their windows shattered, half-hidden by brush and oak and hawthorn. The cobblestones were thick with moss. Mice scampered in the complex skeins of shadow beneath the boughs. Something long and yellowish brown protruded from a pile of leaves—a human bone. They were probably all around, he realized, the bones of the spiders' last victims. And spanning between limbs of trees, the cross-pieces of windows, everywhere, were veils of cobwebs tenanted by white spiders. After the bustle of the street of dreams, the emptiness of reality was harrowing. The emptiness and solitude of the place made Cisneros feel old, as if the weight of the years was a kind of contagion.

"There...you see," said Cisneros, turning to his friends.

But they, along with the shops and the cars and the pedestrians, had vanished.

Cisneros was startled but not afraid. Perhaps, he thought, he had misunderstood the discretion of his control, perhaps it was impossible to reveal the totality of the actual without eliminating all observers. Of course, he told himself. That must be it. He tried to reinhabit the world of the dream, but—and this did frighten him—he could not remember how it was done. The knowledge of how to manipulate the mate-

rials of the unreal had seemed innate, as uncomplicated and natural a process as breathing, and yet now...He ran a little ways forward into the center of the deserted street, panicked, slipping on the damp mossy stones. He tried again, focusing his will on the act of return, clenching his fists, squeezing his eyes shut. But when he opened them he discovered that nothing had changed. He could sense the forms and tensions of the dream just beyond his range, just out of reach, tantalizing, unattainable. Could the spiders have tricked him? Could all their promises merely have been a terrible deceit? Had they been playing with him, weaving another duplicitous web of his needs and desires? He whirled around, expecting to see some vast trap closing shut on him. But there were only the shattered buildings, the trees, the desolate moon, and he realized that the trap had already been sprung. They had raised him high and left him in a place where wit and knowledge had no audience, no use, no meaning, and thus were nothing but a torment.

The ruins appeared to have inched nearer, the network of shadows was shrinking to encage him. The bone-knob moon with its scatter of ashy markings looked to have lowered and been caught in the fork of two oak limbs, pinning him in place with its strong light. Rustles and skitterings from within the abandoned houses. Something tickled his cheek; he brushed at it, and a spider came away on his hand, perched like an ornate ring on the middle joint of his forefinger. With a shout, he knocked it off. The sound of his fear was swallowed by the silence.

"No, please, you can't do this, please," he said in a tone of hurried bargaining, like a drunk trying to reason with the police. "I'll do anything, I'll..."

What, he thought, what could he do for those who could do anything, who could make a world and people it with the fictions of chemistry?

"I'm begging you," he said. "There must be something...something I can do. Please!" Tears were coming, and though he had the urge to stop them, to be a man, to live up to his old ideals of machismo, he let them come, having for

the moment a childlike faith that they would move his tormentors to mercy. "Really," he said, "there must be something. I mean"—he spread his hands like a lawyer beseeching a jury—"you don't just create something complicated and fine, and then throw it away."

The wind kicked up a flurry of dead leaves, fluted through the gapped windows and doors, and Cisneros, once again driven to panic, began to run along the street, peering this way and that, hoping to find a sign that all this might be temporary, that they were only slapping his wrist for some inadvertent failure, some mistake of judgment or pride. That must be it, he thought, coming to a stop. His pride...they wanted to humble him, to make him aware of their supremacy.

"Believe me," he said to the sky, the ruins, "I know who you are. I'm not a fool, I have no intention of trying to usurp your place." He bowed his head, he choked back a sob. "Please believe me."

The only response was the banging of a loose shutter on the shop across the street.

"I love you," Cisneros said. "I swear...all I want to do is serve you."

He laughed at the fecklessness of the lie, at the pitiful blindness that had inspired it.

As if they would not be aware that he was lying.

After a few seconds he walked over to a shop, to a window in which hung a icicle of broken glass. He worked the piece of glass loose from the dried, crumbling putty and studied it, seeing his opaque reflection in its warped surface. He ran a finger along the edge. Sharp enough. It was hard to think about setting the point to his throat, but he did it anyway. They must want death of him, as they had wanted it of Tyrell, and he would give it to them. Sooner or later they would summon him for another act in the dream, and then perhaps they would confer upon him the power that they had promised. He closed his eyes, firmed his grip on the glass, and with all his strength, shoved the point into his jugular vein.

There was no pain, no weakness, no sensation of any sort,

and when he opened his eyes, he saw that the glass knife had vanished.

This, then, was what they had in store for him. This was to be his prison for eternity, and he would not even be permitted the escape of death. He knew this with the clarity that had attended the knowledge visited upon him in dreams, and horrified, he spun about, his eyes locking onto wreckage and decay, the artifacts of his new home, the dissolution through which he would scurry like a rat in an abandoned museum. He started running again, trying to believe that they would relent, that he would turn a corner and find himself back in the dream. That would be like them, he told himself, that would be in character with their spidery ways—to allow him to lose faith and then restore it. At last despair heavied him, and he dropped to his knees, wanting to call upon God, the God who had lived in the minds of men centuries before, and who might yet live. Yet he understood the futility of prayer. He was full of useless comprehensions. Why...why had they done this? He had believed in them, he had believed in the possibility of redemption. He would have entertained them, injected a new subtlety into their ancient game, and they had betrayed him. Or perhaps it had not been a betrayal, perhaps fate was a matter of chemistry. What if all personality and fate, he wondered, were the resolution of biochemical laws that the spiders enacted within their dream of the human world? Perhaps they had merely allowed him to act out the essential directives of his personality? More useless insight. He leaked a fuming noise of frustration. Then he clasped his hands to his head, trying to stop thought, to contain fear, and yet thinking, thinking, always thinking, imagining that the last men living in these ruins, in other ruins all over the world, must have experienced this same harrowing loneliness and bewilderment, bereft of love and the possibility of salvation, of the least good thing. He tracked his gaze across the ruins of Nantucket Town, taking in the gaunt oaks and the skeletal shadows, the blind windows, the husks of old grog shops and apothecaries, and feeling in the depths of his soul the finality of his circumstance, he let out a terrified wail,

a white plume of a cry that seemed to go up and up, arcing out over the emptiness, a hopeless, directionless signal that carried with it all the fears and cares and heart of the solitary, eternal inhabitant of that country of failed dreams and broken lives, that endless gray absence known as Nomans Land.

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Handwritten signature of Robert Frazer, consisting of a stylized 'R' and 'F' followed by the name 'ROBERT FRAZER' in capital letters.

Nantucket, Massachusetts
1989

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Considered a master of short fiction. Lucius Shepard has won several accolades, including the Nebula Award for the novella "R&R" and the World Fantasy Award for his first collection, *THE JAGUAR HUNTER*, from Arkham House Publishers. His novels include *GREEN EYES*, from Ace Books, and *LIFE DURING WAR-TIME*, from Bantam Books.

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NANTUCKET SLAYRIDES

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